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The *Ai*-Novel: *Ai no seikatsu* and Its Challenge to the Japanese Literary Establishment

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For men, behavior such as delving into and narrating one's life experiences is at once considered tantamount to the work of a novelist. I, however, have been told that it is important for me to write about being 'a woman' while listening to others' experiences of being 'women'—probably because it is thought that the problems faced by being 'a woman' become clearer when 'women' delve into them together. Although male novelists who write about the experience of the self are not at all interesting, at least their perspective in writing is not narrowed to probing into what it means to be 'a man.' Why is it that only women must continue to write about being 'a woman'?

—Kanai Mieko, “Onna ni totte onna to wa nani ka?”
(What are women to a woman?), 1972.

Kanai Mieko's interrogation of gender categories has been the subject of repeated academic inquiries in both English and Japanese since the early 1990s.¹ Her early short stories, “Funiku” (Rotting meat, 1972) and “Usagi” (Rabbits, 1972), both of which have been translated into English, have generated the majority of such queries. These have sought to show, in varying ways, how Kanai Mieko, from the very outset of her writing career, problematized the written formation of female subjectivities through her short fiction and poetry. Indeed, by immersing herself in avant-garde writing and art (the preserve of leading *male* writers, artists, and intellectuals in the Japan of the time) Kanai drew upon surrealist techniques, tropes, and theories to write poetry and fiction which



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dismantled such gender formulations.² However, while her critique of conventional literary inscriptions of woman/gender has hitherto drawn focus in literary criticism on Kanai, in this article I instead focus on her simultaneous critique—evident in the epigraph above—of conventional literary inscriptions of man/self.³ In particular, I seek to show, via Tomi Suzuki’s formative theory on the I-novel, how her debut novella, *Ai no seikatsu* (Love life, 1967) can be read as both invoking and subverting what had previously been seen as an intrinsically masculine genre.

Writing against the I-Novel

Let us begin by situating Kanai’s debut novella alongside Virginia Woolf’s 1919 essay, “Modern Fiction,” in which Woolf critiques dominant masculine modes of writing and proposes a means of conceiving and writing a quotidian reality which challenges naturalism’s claim to representational accuracy. Woolf writes:

The writer [of naturalist fiction] seems constrained, not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole [...]. But [... i]s life like this? Must novels be like this?

Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being ‘like this’. Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old [...]. Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?⁴

Of course, the naturalism against which Woolf was writing, and the twentieth-century *watakushi shōstestu* or *shishōstestu* (I-novel) against which (it is my contention) Kanai is writing, cannot be straightforwardly homogenized; nor does this essay attempt to do so. However, both can be

understood as attempts by an overwhelmingly masculine literary status quo to lay claim to and govern the terms of represented “reality.”

Writers of naturalist fiction in Japan, such as Tayama Katai (1872–1930) and Shimazaki Tōson (1872–1943), directed the “scientific” and “objective” gaze of the naturalist writer primarily towards that which was personal, in producing an analysis, not of society, or of life in general—which they felt they did not have the authority to comment upon—but of the “self.” A number of “self-conscious I-novelists” writing in the Taishō period (1912–1926) in Japan subsequently adopted this meticulous approach to the self in writing very candidly about their daily life as impoverished writers.⁵ Thus, with its often rambling, plotless, quasi-autobiographical searching for and inscription of a “self,” the I-novel seems paradoxically to marry Woolf’s critique of western naturalism’s “tyrant,” with the “scientific” and “objective” gaze of the naturalist writer himself. As Fowler writes:

Rather than attempt to create a fictional world that transcended his immediate circumstances, [the I-novelist] sought to transcribe the world as he had experienced it, with little concern for overall narrative design. Unschooling in the notion of telos, he regarded plot as an unnatural fabrication. He therefore limited the scope of his authority to his personal realm, the depiction of which was dictated by lived experience, and his chief enterprise consisted of recording his own thoughts and actions.⁶

Indeed, in terms of their textual materiality, these early I-novel experiments appear closer in kind to the impressionistic writing about subjective experience which Woolf’s essay advocates, than they are to their putative naturalist origins. Therefore, we can only begin to understand how this seemingly (and ostentatiously) humble genre can be read as an attempt to *govern* the terms of “reality” in modern Japanese literature through a consideration of how the genre came to evolve, as Tomi Suzuki puts forward, as a powerful and pervasive “meta-narrative.”⁷

The self-conscious I-novelists writing in the Taishō period were writing at a time when “the ideal of the individual self as an independent social and moral entity was widely considered a fundamental premise of life, literature, and art;” they thus thought that the novel was a “transparent medium” through which they could “faithfully reveal [their] ‘genuine self.’”⁸ Their chronicles of daily life focused on describing and exposing the sexual and romantic feelings of the writer, while actively seeking and

inscribing—hence *ascribing*—ever greater levels of complexity to the notion of (the written) “self.” Although the limitations of writing (and living) in this way quickly became apparent to the writers themselves, the I-novel as a genre nevertheless thrived as “an interpretive tradition or reading paradigm” from the 1920s to the 1960s.⁹ As Suzuki notes:

The term [I-novel] circulated as a powerful and uncanny signifier without a fixed, identifiable signified, generating a critical discourse that informed not only the nature of literature but also views of Japanese selfhood, society and tradition. [...] The characteristics of the so-called I-novel texts were largely defined by and within this I-novel meta-narrative and then projected back on certain texts.¹⁰

An I-novel is not, therefore, simply a genre of writing in which the experiences of the masculine self are “delves into and narrated;” it is more crucially an implied mode of *reading* which assumes that the narrator/protagonist will be inferred by the reader to be an unmediated (re)presentation of the writer himself. In such readings, as Suzuki posits, the authenticity and immediacy of the uniquely “Japanese” mode of writing is placed in binary contrast with the western novel, and held up as being representative of Japanese society, history, and culture. Thus, up until and including the time of Kanai’s debut with *Love Life*, the male author’s life was, broadly speaking, considered as “the definitive ‘text’” through which not only literary meaning, but social and historical reality was established.¹¹ That such a means of establishing and circulating meaning privileged the experiences of men while excluding those of women was thus no accident.

Love Life operates in several ways to disrupt and confound such literary critical discourse. First and foremost, its title (*Ai no seikatsu*), appears at once to invite the novella to be read *as* an I-novel, while forewarning of its challenge to such an established literary medium through the simple, but effective, means of the pun with the kanji for “love” (*ai*).¹² Although “Ai” is a relatively common female given-name in Japanese, precisely because of the expectations that a novel might constitute a search for the self, it could here be read as playing, not only on the English first person “I,” but also its homophone, the “eye.” Coupled with the word “*seikatsu*” (quodidian life) the title—which literally rendered could be translated as *The Life of Ai*—unmistakably refers to the I-novel genre, while simultaneously informing us that its protagonist is an active viewing female subject, whose name evokes the concept of love.

That “Ai” is used to refer to the protagonist/narrator solely in the title and never again within the pages of the novella might further confirm that the title’s function is to evoke and play on the I-novel genre—including those early I-novelist writers’ explorations of their sexual desires, or “love life.”

Secondly, the novella adopts a narrative form, a kind of stream-of-consciousness, recalling Woolf’s “myriad impressions” of a non-linear lived experience, being subjective, chaotic, fragmentary, and of the moment.¹³ In so doing, it can be seen to challenge the I-novel’s “objective” voice which provides a retrospective, rationalized, and diachronic account of the self and its day-to-day experiences:

From the canteen window the rail tracks in the station yard can be seen, and the painter comments that, viewed from a height, the tracks have the vivid reality of another dimension to them, as if a child has drawn the tracks in black and white with slate pencils. I listened to the painter’s words while enduring a pain, like a tension, that crept up the right side of my back. Suddenly the pain came upon me.

The pain is suddenly upon me. As I finish reading the letter, the right side of my back is throbbing. I close my eyes for a minute, while listening to the melody of the tango that the coffee shop is playing (the *Tango of Roses*) and hold my breath. [...]

It’s so painful. I wake alone in the middle of the night and hold my pen; I’m so scared sometimes that I even wake up F. I hate it. I hate it. I’m afraid. My life, every day, the room, the desk, everything, is completely unrelated to me. There’s nothing to be done, that’s how it is. I feel like I’m going mad. I feel sick.

I turned to the painter and spoke impulsively.

I tried to fight the words, washed clean by my sincerity, as they came out of my mouth.¹⁴

In this extract, as is the case for much of the novella, Ai’s stream-of-consciousness travels back and forth between past memories, anxieties for the future, and her own present physical and sensory experiences, all of which are linked associatively. In the first paragraph above, Ai recalls visiting a canteen in a department store in Ikebukuro with an unnamed character, referred to only as “the painter,” after they have both just said goodbye at Tokyo station to a mutual friend moving to Kyoto. The painter’s comment that the rail tracks have the “vivid reality of another dimension” coincides with a painful sensation that creeps up Ai’s back. In the second paragraph this pain then intrudes into the “present moment”—

or rather—the most chronologically recent moment that has been described within the stream of consciousness at this point in the novella. In this “present moment,” Ai is seated at a café having just read a letter from the friend who (has now already) moved to Kyoto. The pain experienced in the present moment in turn evokes the “pain” of waking up alone in the middle of the night in her room as described in the third paragraph. Through re-experiencing this pain, Ai then recalls her impulsive speech-act to the painter at another, different point in the past, when she is visiting him in his atelier (which has already been set up and partially explained in the course of her narration). Finally, in the last paragraph, she reflects upon her emotions at the time of that speech act—although we are never told *what* she said to the painter. Through such associative writing, which switches back and forth between the present and multiple past memories, the narrative creates a multiplicity of *Ais* (eyes), all of whom seem preoccupied with a particular aspect of their respective “selves,” whether physiological, existential, experiential, or emotional. This thereby problematizes any illusory unity of voice (and, hence, of identity) that might otherwise be implied by the mere fact of the text’s having a first-person narrator. In other words, the implied promise made by I-novel discourse that a first-person narrative is necessarily guaranteed to reveal a whole, unified, authorial “identity,” is fatally compromised.

Developing this point, we can see how *Love Life* challenges a correlated premise of the I-novel genre: namely that, through the medium of the novel, it is possible to record such a thing as an “individual self” that stands independently from the culture in which it is enmeshed. Instead, *Love Life* manages to inscribe a kaleidoscope of contemporary late-1960s Japanese culture, both popular and avant-garde, within the stream-of-consciousness narrative of its protagonist. Ai’s narrative does *not* rely on an objective voice to constitute the terms of her identity against all that might conventionally be understood as “external” to her. Instead, it elides her “internal monologue” of recollections, observations, and physical descriptions with the transcription of multiple texts and “real world” cultural phenomena at the moment that she encounters them. For instance, the text incorporates the lyrics to a Miyako Harumi song that Ai overhears in the shopping arcade at the point in the narrative when it is played; so too does it amalgamate the text of both the postcard invitation she receives to a John Cage concert, and her friend’s letter from Kyoto, at the moment when Ai reads them. By dissolving any boundary between Ai’s thoughts, “real world” contemporary culture, and the texts that Ai

reads, the novella thus gestures towards the notion that identity itself is an assemblage of texts.

Love Life's Reception by the Dazai Osamu Literary Prize Committee

The extent of the challenge posed by the novella to the literary establishment of the day can be clearly understood when one reads the comments it received when it was runner-up in the competition for the 1967 Dazai Osamu Literary Prize. The panel for the prize comprised of six men, all but one of whom were in their sixties: four (Karaki Junzō, Kawakami Tetsutarō, Usui Yoshimi and Nakamura Mitsuo) had graduated from either Tokyo or Kyoto University and subsequently pursued careers as literary critics, writers, translators, or university professors; while the other two (Ibuse Masuji and Ishikawa Jun) were famous writers. In other words, the judging panel were (unsurprisingly) wholly emblematic of the Japanese literary establishment. The first thing of note in their comments on *Love Life* is a discernible attempt to account for the novella, through their inventing a biographical explanation for its narrative procedures. In other words, they establish the meaning and worth of Kanai's debut novella through a reading of Kanai *herself*. The evaluative criteria brought to bear upon Kanai and her achievements, moreover, are generated through an implied comparison to the ideal I-novel protagonist: the mature, university educated, male author. Such a figure—a figure which much resembles the judges themselves, one might add—is repeatedly evoked (and implicitly *invoked*) as a means to critique, pejoratively, Kanai's writing. For instance, Karaki writes:

The talent of the work just trickles out with no control. If the writer had ... placed a brake on her talent, allowing it to pool and stagnate, it would gain weight. But I suppose this is an impossible request for a nineteen-year-old.¹⁵

Kanai's youth, then, is for Karaki, the supreme determining factor for the novella's narrative technique (or implied lack thereof). Similarly, Kawakami comments upon both Kanai's age and gender which he perceives as being directly relevant to the literary worth of *Love Life*. The novella, he opines,

... strikes one with the distinctiveness of a writer who is a nineteen-year-old woman, half living the lifestyle of a student; in short the

weakness of the work is that the freshness that we should highly regard of the discoveries of this adolescent woman who stands for the first time at the gate of life is, at the same time, a handicap.¹⁶

As for Kawakami, so too for Usui. He also remarks upon Kanai's age, commenting that she perforce lacks the education required to be a writer:

[F]or a work of a nineteen-year-old adolescent, it is, relatively speaking, markedly developed, and even interesting. However, I assume this is because the writer has read interesting bits and pieces of foreign literature in translation, and this has given birth to some sensitive responses and reflections. If you wish to become a writer, first, pass the entrance exam of the university of your dreams. Then try writing a novel in five or ten years' time.¹⁷

And so it goes. Nakamura then takes his criticisms one step further than Usui and Kawakami. Instead of choosing to account for both Kanai's age and gender as mere aspects of her biography (the novelist's necessarily having to be judged in terms of a life-story), Nakamura moves closer to naturalizing his colleagues' judgments, by accounting for *Love Life* physiologically:

Miss Kanai Mieko's *Love Life* is a work of a nineteen-year-old adolescent woman but, although it shows literary talent, I cannot think that it is any more than a simple piece of composition. After stuffing her head full of literary images, she relied on her wit and just attempted to write something akin to a novel; its moments of narcissistic innocence arise from her lack of life experience and are physiological in basis, in the same way as you might say that her cheeks are rosy and her skin is pretty.¹⁸

Even if we ignore for a moment the fact that, rather than the text, Kanai herself is the object of critique in the first four judges' comments, it is nonetheless apparent that the elements of the text that elicit their critical disapproval are precisely those discussed above: those textual procedures and features which challenge and problematize conventional I-novel discourse.¹⁹ This in turn allows us to reclaim the judges' critiques, by inverting their pejoration, and revealing the literary-critical prejudices that underpin their pronouncements. For instance, Nakamura's comment that *Love Life* is "something akin to a novel" (*shōsetsu rashī mono*), although

meant to be pejorative, seems nonetheless to allude to the numerous ways in which, as we have seen, the novella imitates (in order to play with) the I-novel genre through its title and the narrator's chronicling of mundane events. Similarly, in writing that Kanai's "talent [...] trickles out with no control," Karaki is presumably referring to Kanai's decision to replace any "coherent" internal voice with a stream-of-consciousness narrative. The multitude of contemporary references to popular culture, counter-culture and surrealism that are embedded in Ai's narrative, not to mention her half-student-like lifestyle to which Kawakami takes exception, is surely the basis for Nakamura's lament that Kanai-the-author's own "head" is "stuffed" with "literary [and artistic] images." By inscribing a contemporary selfhood which is necessarily inextricable from a surrounding popular culture that is no longer of solely Japanese origin, Ai's stream-of-consciousness narrative thus defies conventional modern Japanese conceptions of the duality between "Japanese" and the "foreign literatures" to which Usui refers. Taking all those textual elements together, we can see how they might prove unsettling for Kanai's critics on the panel, critics who wish to continue to define the modern Japanese writing subject in, effectively, their own image: whole, cohesive, rationalized, mature, Japanese and male, and the very antithesis of Kanai's narrator. That four mature, university educated, established male authors and critics all felt the need to argue that Kanai had written something which they perceived she lacked the authority to write demonstrates not only that Kanai's novella was indeed considered a threat to such authority, but moreover, the manner in which I-novel discourse conveniently served to police those who wished to hold up different versions of literary reality.

Ai-body-presence

Let us now turn to the remaining two critics on the prize panel, Ibuse and Ishikawa, who, as already noted above, differed from their colleagues through their being (predominantly) creative practitioners rather than (again predominantly) literary critics. Neither invents biographical explanations for the novella's narrative procedures and each, moreover, is alive to the interpretive demands *Love Life* makes of its readers. The more positive response is from Ibuse, who writes:

When I read the beginning [of *Love Life*], I had the feeling that it wasn't going to work. It was like the bewilderment I felt in standing in front of a modernist painting. I remember my heart racing. It was a feeling akin to that. However, little by little, as I continued to read on, it

started to make sense I came to the meeting with the intention that if the selection committee had gone cold on *Visions in Azure*, I would cast my vote for *Love Life*.²⁰

Ibuse's recognition of the novella's narrative form as reminiscent of modernism, his acceptance of uncertainty and "bewilderment" as potentially positive responses to art, and his assertion that the novella "started to make sense" as he read on, sets him apart from all the other critics, suggesting that Ibuse's own sense of artistic worth was not held hostage by the kind of insecurities that, one might argue, bubble to the surface in the responses of the previous four judges. However, that *Love Life* was runner-up in the prize was largely due to the grudging influence of Ishikawa, even as he bemoaned the *low* standard of the entries. The world of literature, he laments, is hardly flourishing; "rather, it is close to decline" (*dochira ka to ieba, bunkosuitai ni chikai*).²¹ Accordingly, even though *Love Life* is his first choice, he nevertheless remains troubled by what he terms a "fuzziness":

Even though a flash of talent can be seen in *Love Life*, the world of this novel dies before it has taken solid shape. We leave reality, but before even gaining entrance into the world of fiction, everything becomes fuzzy. To borrow from the words used in the text itself, it does not result in *dépaysement*. Worst of all, the writer's feelings rise up and are exposed. In a novel, feelings are completely useless. [...] It is vulgar for powerful elements to rise prominently to the fore, but the fuzziness at its core is troubling.²²

Ishikawa's chief concern is the text's perceived inability to achieve a heightened representationalist aesthetic—or as he writes, to "result in *dépaysement*" (a sense of otherness from our familiar reality). Equally noteworthy, however, is his rebuke that "the writer's feelings rise up and are exposed" which is significant, particularly when one sets it against his other observation that "[w]e leave reality but before even gaining entrance into the world of fiction, everything becomes fuzzy." Taken together, these three comments suggest that for Ishikawa, in certain places, the novella works as a representation of Kanai's emotional and psychological *reality* (something which he finds problematic), while nonetheless being a self-evident piece of fiction which leads him to perceive a blurring—or "fuzziness"—of genre.

So, what are the features of the text that might have led Ishikawa to this “troubled” conclusion? One answer might lie in the way in which Ai’s narrative works to repeatedly foreground the body and its repressed material reality, thereby inscribing the self through a matrix of associations—and we saw this associative technique at work in the extract quoted above—which I shall term *Ai-body-presence*. One might then note that the repressed material reality that this literary matrix describes greatly resembles Julia Kristeva’s idea of the “abject.” In setting out her theory of the “abject,” Kristeva famously challenges Freud and Lacan’s positioning of a finite dualism at the origin of the self by positing the maternal body as a pre-cultural zone that precedes and produces the ego.²³ She then argues that in order to conceive the self as an “ideal,” “whole,” “separate,” “clean,” and crucially “human” entity, the mother’s body, along with excrement, filth—and, more broadly, the world of animals or animalism—are radically and violently repressed, or “abjected,” from the infant’s identity.²⁴ However, precisely because, Kristeva argues, repression is enacted through our use of language, the abject, or the reality it represents, is not permanently banished, but continues to assault us unexpectedly, confronting us with its horrific material reality. Such encounters thus are “articulated” through the fragmentation of language, or rather a breakdown in the subject’s ability to describe reality. Accounting for *Love Life* in these terms thus helps us to see Ishikawa’s twin expressions of what he finds “troubling” (“the writer’s feelings *rise up* and are exposed,” “it is vulgar for powerful elements *to rise* prominently to the fore”) as steps on the road to understanding Ai’s fragmented narrative as a textual enactment of the abject, of the return of the repressed and of the consequent fractured “self.”

For Kristeva “[f]ood loathing” is “perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection” and is central—if such a fragmented associative narrative can have a center—to *Love Life*.²⁵ The first task Ai undertakes for the day, as the novella commences, is to attempt to remember what she has eaten over the previous week and on which day, and it is through this task that the narrator’s aims in writing her diary emerge. As Ai writes:

A new day has started.

Although, where yesterday finished I already can’t clearly remember. I can’t even properly recall what kind of day it was yesterday. I look at the clock next to my pillow and it’s ten o’clock. What was it that I had

for dinner last night? For dinner last night I had deep-fried oysters, apple and lettuce salad, and miso soup with tofu.

The day before yesterday was pork chops, potato salad, and miso soup with spring onion and deep-fried tofu. Lunch yesterday was a croissant with a glass of milk, and the day before it was the same. Anyway, when I woke up at ten o'clock yesterday, I finally succeeded in remembering what was for dinner and lunch in detail, stretching back a week.

But today I can only recall it fragmentarily.²⁶

Ai's inability to remember things, and in particular, to recall what she has eaten over the past week, are thus a source of anxiety. She writes that yesterday she called up her husband F to resolve the matter, making a note of meals eaten. Today, she looks at the note to prompt her memory, but realizing that the note and her memory contradict each other, and reasoning with herself that the note is based on yesterday's memory, she concludes that she has no way of knowing which is correct, her memory or the note. In other words, neither "consciousness" nor "text" are able to access or accurately represent a certain material reality, just as Kristeva's abject is a pre-linguistic state which cannot be described through, and causes the fragmentation of, language.

Ai's troubled preoccupation with food here foreshadows later, traumatic encounters with the act of eating, the memory of which she continually suppresses:

I am always in terror of my incessant hunger. I always have an empty stomach, and cannot stop thinking I want to eat. And yet, when I eat even one or two mouthfuls of food, my empty stomach makes me so anxious that my hunger vanishes without trace. Just looking at food, my throat heaves with nausea.²⁷

In the original passage, Ai writes "*taemanai kūfukukan ga, itsumo watashi o obiyakashite imasu,*" translated above as: "I am always in terror of my incessant hunger." However, the term *obiyakashite imasu*, unlike the word terror, also connotes being taken suddenly unaware; therefore, its use here suggests that Ai's hunger is a force that assaults her suddenly, regardless of her intent. In this sense, we can see how Ai's hunger functions much like Kristeva's "abject." Hunger "draws" Ai to the physical act of eating which she subsequently cannot remember or record accurately, just as the abject "draws [one] toward the place where meaning collapses."²⁸

Moreover, in the middle of this act, after one or two mouthfuls, whereupon the boundaries between Ai and the abject entity (the food) are collapsed, her hunger turns quickly to fear and anxiety, in the same way that, for Kristeva, reunion with the mother's body creates a sudden fear of being suffocated.

The most protracted appearance of "abject" food imagery occurs when Ai visits a restaurant in downtown Tokyo. Ai sits down at a small table for two and quickly orders a small bottle of beer, Hungarian style beef stew, bread, and coffee. Having ordered, she lights a cigarette and overhears fragments of the conversations of her fellow diners. One of them calculates that the average person consumes 76,650 mealtimes in a lifetime. Another exclaims that this is "surprisingly few" (*angai sukunē mon da na*).²⁹ Thus, we are introduced to the idea, even before Ai has begun eating, of food as a continuous mass (an average of 76,650 mealtimes per lifetime) constantly passing through us, as human waste, as excess, as that which we will irrevocably exclude and abject. The paradoxical counter-claim that the number of mealtimes is surprisingly few reminds us that, by contrast, each meal for Ai becomes excessive even after a few mouthfuls.

As the abject continues to intrude into her narrative, we are presented with a chain of images that pertain both to her real-time situation and the vivid and traumatic memories that they provoke. These become progressively more grotesque in nature and lead both her, and a fellow diner (who has entered the restaurant, been seated opposite Ai, and ordered spaghetti bolognese), to "abject" their food. The fellow diner's meal arrives. Ai watches him, defamiliarizing the eating process by commenting that it is as if he is "shoveling food into the hole in his face." The spaghetti then prompts a memory of the small dark infirmary at her primary school with a box-frame on its wall bearing the inscription "many kinds of parasites." Ai recalls:

In the middle of the frame, six round shapes had been dug out, and in those holes "many kinds of parasites" were sleeping peacefully, tightly. Among them was one which I always ended up fixing upon; it was a long, thin, cream and white roundworm; this roundworm glistened amongst pink lumps, sleeping deeply. What was that pink stuff that resembled fried-off minced meat? One reason I particularly hate spaghetti bolognese could be that it makes me remember that roundworm.³⁰

The man in front of Ai becomes uncomfortable as she stares at his dish. She asks him “You know roundworms?” He looks down at the plate as if remembering. “They look like that. Don’t they.” Without finishing the last few mouthfuls the man immediately stands up and exits the restaurant, leaving Ai to wonder if she is “terribly vulgar.”³¹

By describing him as “shoveling food into the hole in his face,” Ai renders the fellow diner a mere performer of mechanical movements in front of a gaping orifice, as an “uncanny,” disembodied human presence, or cadaver.³² For Kristeva the uncanny aspect of the cadaver is due to the fact that it inhabits that liminal space of the abject, as something which *was* human but which has been expelled, and is now thus “the most sickening of wastes.”³³ This elision between food as waste and the customer as waste, and Ai’s revulsion at them both suggests that for Ai the boundaries between self and other have (or are being perceived as having) collapsed, thereby immersing Ai in abject imagery. Ai perceives that it is no longer just that the process of living produces constant waste that she must continually discard and abject; rather, human life itself is excess materiality, or waste. In other words, she perceives that her *own* body is abject. Thus, the customer can be read as the defamiliarized image, or reflection, of Ai’s body eating and as a materialization of the inevitability of her own death.

This recognition of her own immortality is reinforced during Ai’s recollection of her childhood memory and long held association between spaghetti bolognese and roundworms. The image of the cadaver—and the elision between herself and it—intensifies, returning repeatedly and menacingly in the form of the human anatomical models on display in the infirmary. Their brightly colored innards “make [her] wonder about the color of her own innards.”³⁴ In other words, they prompt her to consider her body as objectively as she considers the cadaver’s. The lined-up medical paraphernalia, scissors, tweezers, and bandages, also compound this association between her body, lined up as an object of examination and surgical treatment, and damaged, infected, or dead “matter.”

Ai finally escapes these images of her death by assuming the abject identity of the roundworm. The roundworm parasite, the focal image of the passage, traverses three states of being. Firstly, it is seemingly passive: “sleeping deeply among pink lumps,” it reminds Ai, through its inert, object-like state, of spaghetti bolognese. Secondly, it is liminal: as a “parasite,” it is both object and agent, existing by consuming the host that it lives within. Finally, it is active, eating and eventually killing that which sustains its life. Ai is similarly transgressive through her communication

with the customer: seemingly passive, as she watches him eat; liminal, as she gives the uncomfortable customer “the smile of a roundworm,” adopting its identity; and finally active, by speaking and repelling that which she dislikes. Her speech act enables her to spurn passivity and death and signals her exit from the realm of the abject and her re-entry into the symbolic order. Through it, in fact, Ai repels the customer in the same way as her narrative repelled the members of the Dazai Osamu Prize Committee.

Ai’s attempts to locate and describe episodes of physical intensity which elude her memory thus result in the formulation of an abject identity (“trickl[ing] out with no control,” as Karaki might have put it); and it is clear that such an identity subverts conventional expectations of femininity (with “rosy” cheeks and “pretty” skin, as Nakamura might have put it). However, as *Love Life* progresses, repressed memories and associations that center around the abject maternal body serve more specifically to highlight the manner in which female identities are necessarily cast as abject, not only through literary critical discourse but through the wider social infrastructure and its attendant institutions. Hence, having repelled the male customer, Ai recalls visiting her aunt in a maternity hospital, the architecture of which serves to cue another set of associations that generate potential meanings clustered around the notion of “woman.” Specifically, in her memory’s reconfiguration of the hospital, Ai forces a link between the hospital corridor and (Ai’s perception of its resemblance to) a brothel. She writes that: “[e]xiting the hospital ward was a dark narrow corridor that reminded one of a brothel, and at the end of the corridor was a tap.”³⁵ By suggesting a collapse of the distinction between “mother” and “whore” through an alignment of the physical spaces wherein motherhood and whoredom are performed (the maternity ward and the brothel), Ai’s narrative necessarily foregrounds the *roles* that constitute “women” in patriarchal societies. The fact that such roles might be social rather than “natural” and therefore learned is compounded by the additional similarity Ai’s narrative discerns between the hospital building and the institution of the school: “There was a set of steps to the side of the tap, and these steps had a wide landing like those in a school building (all of which was permeated with the smell of disinfectant.)”³⁶ Moreover, the narrative’s associative technique has already led Ai’s memory to jump from “school” to “hospital.” (Indeed, one could argue that the fact that her memory of school is of the school infirmary, collapses the distinction still further).

As a social institution, the school deploys (in Kristeva's phrase) "[t]oo much strictness on the part of the Other," instructing young girls how to deport themselves, while punishing, censoring, or rather—as references to the tap and the smell of disinfectant infers—*cleansing* behavior which departs from examples of modesty and propriety.³⁷ The brothel, in contrast, is where we see (again in Kristeva's phrase) "[t]he lapse of the Other," where women need not abide by rules to cover up or hide their sex, but must instead offer it up for a price.³⁸ Kristeva writes that it is in cases where society produces such contradictory messages that "a narcissistic crisis" is brought about, wherein the subject becomes unable to perceive herself as whole and clean through the mirror which society holds up, and that this "provides, along with its truth, a view of the abject."³⁹ This appears to be borne out by Ai's journey down the hospital stairs, during which time, that which she at first could only perceive as "unknown substances," transpire to be none other than women's sexual organs, all that represents life in the womb, including fetuses, and parts of babies. These have been extracted, preserved, and positioned on the stairs of the hospital, reflecting back to Ai disturbing images of the maternal body—the site of her identity's origin, and its irrevocable termination.

Ai's own narrative aim is to retrieve and stabilize her memories; framed in Kristevan terms, she is attempting to usurp the primacy of the imaginary and symbolic order by retrieving a repressed material reality. Ai's attempt at recovering her memories thus works through the assumption that the subject can subvert the primacy of the imaginary and symbolic order by entering this material reality, and writing (about) it "truthfully." The "truth" which her narrative thus might be considered as serving is therefore the horrific manner in which our physicalized identity (and particularly that of women's) is, in modern society, intellectualized, obscured, and alienated.

F-narrative-absence

This second matrix sits alongside *Ai-body-presence*, commenting on and problematizing it, and is generated by Ai's narration of her relationship with, and search for, her elusive husband F. Through the prism of this literary matrix—which I shall term *F-narrative-absence*—Ai pursues, in contrast, the notion that her identity is a fiction reliant upon the absent other: F. The novella presents us with a second constellatory network of associations, a matrix of signification(s) that further disrupts and undermines any putative conception of the written self as a coherent,

cohesive, unproblematic whole (of the sort so fundamental to I-novel discourse).

However, if F is “absent,” the *fact* of his absence is continually present. Upon getting up in the morning, the first thing Ai encounters are the physical traces he has left behind him that morning: the un-washed up crockery from breakfast; an unexpected listening choice left on the record player; and the magazine he has left open. Furthermore, Ai’s narrative repeatedly returns to him. In several places, it deviates from Ai’s present physical situation to ponder the meaning of their relationship and her feelings for him. In her memories of past traumatic events (for instance, the episode at the maternity hospital) he appears and comes to her aid. F also features in all Ai’s correspondence with others: when she visits the Shinjuku Jazz Café, *Mokuba*, she exchanges words with a young man who turns out to be one of F’s students; he is mentioned in the letter Ai receives from her friend in Kyoto; and again in the conversation that she holds with another friend, the painter. At the end of each of these episodes, Ai returns to the fact that F has disappeared and describes her heightening anxiety, reiterating her hypothesis that he has met with an accident, until it finally transpires he has been at his friend’s house all day. Despite his absence, F thus pervades every experience, memory, and encounter of Ai’s, and her search—both literal and metaphysical—for him, shapes her identity and drives the narrative forwards:

My life with F. Sometimes I wonder what F is to me, but in the end I’m left not understanding. I can only think as others might say, that F is my husband; I love him. Whether this is true or not is not for me to know. F and I are married. F and I are husband and wife. F is my husband. F leaves for work every morning. I am his wife. I love my husband. I exhale these words as if they are sentence examples in a foreign languages lesson. I even try saying them in English and French. But at any rate, they, at the present moment, seem to me like an unshakeable truth. F is a concrete, and moreover, abstract presence. Although this is perhaps true of all husbands.⁴⁰

Throughout this passage, F and Ai are rendered as abstract concepts, like mathematical symbols, or, in Ai’s phrase, mere “sentence examples” which have no actual *referent*; and their rendering as such enables Ai to make and test various ontological assertions about “self” and “other.” Statements such as “F and I are married” and “F and I are husband and wife” demonstrate how Ai conceives of herself and F both as entities that

join together to create one (married) state while retaining their distinction from each other. Although Ai describes their objectification and possession each by the other, with phrases such as “F is my husband” / “I am his wife,” she nonetheless shows how this does not affect their individual agency by stressing their active subjectivity in the following sentences: “F leaves for work every morning;” “I love my husband.” These extremely simple statements reinforce our understanding of the identity of each (F leaves: he is absent/ Ai loves: her name means love) while stressing the contingency and primary importance of the other (F) to the self (Ai). (This is particularly noticeable in the Japanese, wherein F is positioned first in all but one sentence.) In this way, rather than shape her identity through the othering of all that which she conceives as “external,” Ai seeks to understand her connection to reality through the other.

Establishing the primacy of F to her identity does not, however, entail Ai’s negation of her own existence. Rather, in constructing a selfhood which is contingent on the other, Ai is able to make assertions of presence which are not founded on the need or desire to possess, reduce, or eradicate the other. The contingency of Ai’s existence is further emphasized by the manner in which Ai precedes her analysis of her relationship with F with several phrases that emphasize the provisional nature of such analysis. She writes, “[s]ometimes I wonder,” “I can only think as others might say,” and “[w]hether it is true or false is not for me to know.” By using these expressions, Ai demonstrates that she is fully aware of the provisionality of the truth of her assertions about herself, but also of others’ claims to “truth.” Because Ai acknowledges this provisionality of truth, words float free from her (and others’) subjective realities, as if they are “sentence examples in a foreign languages lesson.” Their detachment from the potential meaning which Ai, or anyone could imbue them with, strips them of empirical meaning. Hence, they become a “fictional” space.

This “fictional” space invites a very different reading from those invited by I-novel discourse. An I-novel, to even qualify as such, necessitates the elimination of potential multiple meanings and interpretations of its textual operation in order to reduce it to a single, “definitive” origin, the “author.” The passage above, is by contrast, constructed in such a manner that it is impossible to reach a single definitive reading of it. All that we are left certain about when we read the passage above, is that for Ai (who is herself a fictional construct), F is “a material and moreover abstract presence” (*gutaiteki de, nao chūshōteki na sonzai*), but we are still left unsure *what* this means. Is he a “real” person; part of Ai’s imagination; an abstract symbol or metaphor for something

else; or all of these? Moreover, the very use of an initial appears to ask the reader to address the question of what (if anything) F stands for.

While various theories for these questions above have already been posited, all that is certain is that the absence of a referent parallels the absence of F from Ai's life.⁴¹ And this absence of a referent creates a textual space that allows the reader to contribute actively to the text and create multiple interpretations and meanings. In other words, the presence (or absence) of "F" democratizes the production of meaning and serves to privilege the reader over the (implied) "author." This textual procedure is thus in marked contrast to the successful operation of I-novel discourse, which forever places the reader in a position of obeisance to the dominant voice and supposed identity of the author. Moreover, it serves to stress the fictive nature of the text itself. F comes to symbolize the process of reading as an act of interpretation. In other words, as a metafictional device, F necessarily problematizes the creation of a coherent unified, first-person narrative voice, by constantly reminding us that it is fictional, and the mode of reading necessitated by I-novel discourse itself. Thus if F can be made to stand for anything, it is perhaps for this interpretive space; or "fiction."⁴² F, as a metafictional device which alludes to the text's own constructedness, then, might also begin to account for "the fuzziness at [the novella's] core" that Ishikawa found so "troubling."

Conclusions

These twin matrices collide at the end of the novella when death, which has hitherto manifested itself in both Ai's abject visions, and her hypotheses (or fictions) of what might have happened to F, becomes a vivid and real event. After hanging up the phone from her conversation with F's friend's wife, Ai overhears a couple arguing behind her. The young woman is furious with the man for saying that he wished to die before he turns thirty and tells him that with his attitude he might as well try suicide. When they start crossing an intersection, a car comes round the corner without reducing its speed and hits them. Ai instinctively runs to the girl thinking that the man at least might have received his wish. A crowd of people gathers around them while the man's hands and legs are convulsing. The woman lies still on her front, a pool of blood spreading out from underneath her. Ai notices that the woman had been carrying a book; she sees that the covers of the book have come apart, and that the book is lying open next to a bucket of rubbish. As the ambulance arrives, Ai remembers that she had speculated that day that F might die, or be dead. She picks up the book and gives it to the policeman at the scene, telling

him it belonged to the woman. She lights a cigarette and says: “That young woman died. She died with complete ease. Complete ease.”⁴³ With tears streaming down her face, Ai runs in the opposite direction of the scene of the accident.

On the one hand, this conclusion could be interpreted as affirming the textual primacy of the abject, in our first literary matrix, *Ai-body-presence*, in describing the nature of human existence. The event occurs immediately after Ai realizes that all her theories about F have been proven to be illusory or false. As she puts it, they had “faded under light” (*iroaseta*), and therefore cease to grip her, or have any power over her conception of reality.⁴⁴ Moreover, she realizes that such hypothetical (fictional) discourse in itself, is formulated for the very purpose of “fading under light,” for not pertaining to reality.⁴⁵ In contrast, the car accident demonstrates to Ai the same message which the abject seeks to impress upon us, namely that the fragile body is not only the root of our existence, but also its limits. This truth is conveyed to her here in the present moment, in bright and vivid detail, right down to the young man’s convulsions and the young woman’s pool of blood. The incident highlights that death is mundane, complete, and indiscriminate; levelling us all; reducing us to the same.

However, this conclusion could equally be interpreted as affirming the primacy, in accounting for human experience, of our second matrix: *F-narrative-absence*. Ai exclaims: “That young woman died. She died with complete ease. Complete ease.” (*Ano shōjo wa shinda. Shōjo wa mattaku muzōsa ni shinde itta, mattaku.*) The brevity of the first statement underscores Ai’s shock at the completeness of death, at its permanent termination of the woman’s life. Her repetition of the word “complete” indicates that both the “ease” with which death completes, and that it is complete, are traumatic to Ai. The woman’s life is unable to repeat, yet Ai repeats the fact that it has been completed. It is here that the symbolic achieves its ultimate purpose in surpassing death by continuing, even after the body has failed, to attempt to understand, describe and explain human existence. This is also demonstrated by Ai’s act of saving the woman’s book from being discarded as rubbish. Text not only surpasses the body; it gives it scope for plurality of identity and difference of meaning through an endless chain of “substitution.” Crucially, what goes unmentioned is that Ai is clutching her own (unfinished) chronicle of her life, which is to become the novella that the reader is reading. As we, as readers, do not know what book the young woman was holding, *Love Life* might become

for us its substitute and her epitaph, and offers us again the tantalizing prospect of an infinite process of generating literary meaning.

Love Life, then, offers the reader two modes of being that it does not presume to resolve, which in numerous ways lay challenge to the fundamental tenets of I-novel discourse. These two matrices foreground specific preoccupations and compete with each other for narrative space throughout the novella, so that Ai's experience appears as one which is divided by concerns with her own corporeality and for her husband's absence. However, this is not to assert that either matrix is ever defined wholly in opposition to the other, nor that any narrative preoccupation within these matrices is inscribed as a discrete conceptual entity. Rather, each of these matrices and their concomitant preoccupations float in perpetual, liminal relation to the other, neither wholly dependent on the other for its conceptual definition (that difference-with-no-positive-terms that is so fundamental to Saussurean linguistics), nor fully distinct from them. As such they function to destabilize any unity of voice of the writing "I," so longed for by the worthies of the Dazai Osamu prize panel, facilitating the inscription of an identity which repeatedly lays claim to being immediately and physically present, while nevertheless remaining contingent on perpetual absence, or fiction. In so doing, they expose and encapsulate the paradox implicit in the I-novel's pretense that the narrator signals the author's presence, even as it necessarily disavows the possibility of such representation.

NOTES

¹ Kitada Sachie, "Usagi: Hito to bungaku," in *Tanpen josei bungaku: Gendai*, eds. Imai Yasuko, Watanabe Sumiko, and Yabu Teiko (Ōfūsha, 1993) argues that the trope of the *shōjo* (adolescent female) in the story "Usagi" (Rabbits) represents an androgynous, unconscious, pre-sexualized state of being, and therefore engenders the possibilities of transformation and metamorphosis. This point is expanded in Kitada Sachie, "Kanai Mieko ni okeru 'shōjo' to 'boken,'" in *Haha to musume no feminizumu: Gendai kazoku o koete*, eds. Hasegawa Kei, Kitada Sachie, and Mizuta Noriko (Tahata shoten, 1996). Kitada writes that Kanai selects the trope of the *shōjo* as a means to overcome the limitations imposed upon women living in patriarchal societies. Sharalyn Orbaugh, "The Body in Contemporary Japanese Women's Fiction," in *The Woman's Hand: Gender and Theory in Japanese Women's Writing*, eds. Paul Schalow and Janet Walker

(Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996) analyses four of Kanai's early short fiction stories, including "Rabbits" and "Funiku" (Rotting meat), arguing that they align with stories by Kanai's contemporaries in which female protagonists can be seen to challenge patriarchy by returning to the body and inverting the gender roles. Mary Knighton, "Writing the Body as Meat: Kanai Mieko's 'Rotting Meat' as Surreal Fable," in *Japanese Studies around the World 2004. Observing Japan from Within: Perspectives of Foreign Scholars Resident in Japan*, ed. James Baxter (Kyoto: International Research Centre for Japanese Studies, 2004) argues that it is rather through Kanai's use of language in the short story "Rotting meat" that the woman is able to exact her revenge on a Levi-Straussian homosocial economy of exchange in which she is configured as an object. Takeuchi Kayō, "Kanai Mieko 'Usagi' o meguru kuia—'shōjo' no monogatari kara 'watashi' no monogatari e," *Shōwa bungaku kenkyū* (2008) draws upon theory by Judith Butler to pursue an analysis of "Rabbits" as an early example of "queer literature." Mary Knighton, "Down the Rabbit Hole: In Pursuit of Shōjo Alices from Lewis Carroll to Kanai Mieko," in *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal*, 40 (2011) argues that by creating a grotesque and parodic narrative of normative sexuality, "Rabbits" formulates an image of the *shōjo* which is able to move her beyond simplistic and polarized representations as either angel or whore which often beleaguer feminist critics in their analyses, and posits this as a reason why the story is still able to challenge the dichotomization of discourses surrounding the *shōjo* today.

² Knighton, "Writing the Body as Meat: Kanai Mieko's 'Rotting Meat' as Surreal Fable," elaborates on Kanai's extensive connections to the avant-garde scene and compares her use of surrealist techniques and motifs in "Rotting meat" with the poem, "Fable," by Yoshioka Minoru and a short story, "Sarcoma," by Joyce Mansour.

³ Kanai's determination *not* to be read simply through her gender, but to question relentlessly binary formulations of gender categories, manifests itself not only in her poetry and fiction, but also in her essays. For instance, in Kanai Mieko, "Onna ni totte onna to wa nani ka," in *Kōza onna 1: Naze onna ka?* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1972) from which the epigraph above is drawn, Kanai not only directly criticizes Japan's second-wave feminism for consolidating the gender binary through their antithetical rhetoric of protest, but also *joseiron*—theories on women which take as their premise the biological and/or cultural difference of women. A collection of essays, Kanai Mieko, *Obasan no disukuru*, (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1984), also dedicates itself to deconstructing *joseiron* which Kanai writes in her introduction, has come to pervade discourse on "women"

and “women’s writing.”

- ⁴ Virginia Woolf, “Modern Fiction,” in *Twentieth Century Criticism* (London: Longman, 1919), 88–89.
- ⁵ Tomi Suzuki, *Narrating the Self: Fictions of Japanese Modernity* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1996), 7. Suzuki uses the term “self-conscious I-novelists” to describe a group of writers in the Taishō period who described themselves as “I-novelists” in order to differentiate that group from other writers whose novels have been categorized as “I-novels,” but who did not set out to define themselves or their writing as such.
- ⁶ Edward Fowler, *The Rhetoric of Confession: Shishosetsu in Early Twentieth-Century Japanese Fiction* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1988), xxiii–xxiv.
- ⁷ Suzuki, 2.
- ⁸ Suzuki, 7–8.
- ⁹ Suzuki, 7.
- ¹⁰ Suzuki, 2.
- ¹¹ Fowler, xxviii.
- ¹² Although *Ai no seikatsu*’s “Ai” is written in kanji, in her subsequent short story collection, *Yume no jikan* (Dream time, 1970), the female protagonist is named “Ai” in katakana in all three stories, and thus is clearly intended to pun with both “I” and “eye.”
- ¹³ In Lawrence Bowling, “What is the Stream-of-Consciousness Technique?” in *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, vol. LXV, 4 (1950) 333–345, Bowling makes a careful distinction between “interior monologue,” whereby the narration resembles a spoken monologue and is therefore the “*farthest from the unconscious*” in the sense that it replicates thoughts and sensations which have already been converted into language; and “stream-of-consciousness technique,” whereby the narration incorporates non-language phenomena such as “images and sensations.” The latter category, “stream-of-consciousness,” thus better describes both the form of narration that Woolf appears to be advocating in her essay, and the narration in *Love Life*, although Bowling notes that Woolf’s novel, *The Waves*, is written entirely in interior monologue.
- ¹⁴ Kanai Mieko, “Ai no seikatsu,” in *Kanai Mieko: Zentanpenshū*, vol. 1, (Tokyo:

Nihon bungeisha, 1992), 23–24.

¹⁵ Karaki Junzō, in *Kanai Mieko: Zentanpenshū*, vol. 1, 604.

¹⁶ Kawakami Tetsutarō, in *Kanai Mieko: Zentanpenshū*, vol. 1, 604.

¹⁷ Usui Yoshimi, in *Kanai Mieko: Zentanpenshū*, vol. 1, 604. Needless to say, there had been by this point scores of male writers in Japan who had commenced writing and publishing while still at university.

¹⁸ Nakamura Mitsuo, in *Kanai Mieko: Zentanpenshū*, vol. 1, 605.

¹⁹ This is, of course, not to assert that Kanai and her novella were at all singled out for criticism, nor that the kind of criticism that was levelled at her personally was at all unusual in the history of modern Japanese literature. As is made amply evident in the collection of essays in Rebecca Copeland, ed., *Woman Critiqued*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), since the beginning of the Meiji period into the late 1970s, men sought to marginalise and suppress women's creative abilities through criticism of their literature. In particular, they attempted to define and control the very terms of "womanliness," and insisted that women adhere to a specific aesthetic which did not encroach upon the territory of their own artistic endeavours. Moreover, they couched their criticisms in extremely pejorative, physical, sexualised, and personal terms.

²⁰ Ibuse Masuji, in *Kanai Mieko: Zentanpenshū*, vol. 1, 603. Ibuse is referring to the winner of the prize that year, which was Isshiki Jirō, *Seigenki* (Visions in Azure) (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1967). This is an autobiographically-inspired account of a war veteran's return to his hometown, set on the island where the author himself grew up, Okinoerabujima. The island, for the novel's protagonist, is a landscape from which he has been alienated owing to the passage of time; and which he rediscovers by recounting and resolving private memories of his childhood and mother. In other words, the mature male author and his novel adhere in every sense to criteria against which the first four critics sought to measure *Ai no seikatsu*.

²¹ Ishikawa Jun, in *Kanai Mieko: Zentanpenshū*, vol. 1, 603.

²² Ibid.

²³ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 13–14.

²⁴ "Animalism," or the worship of animals, is thought to be one of earliest forms of religion, and, as Kristeva explains, one which primitive societies turned away

from in order exorcise the threat (of sex and murder) that it posed.

²⁵ Kristeva, 2.

²⁶ Kanai, “Ai no seikatsu,” 7–8.

²⁷ Ibid, 34.

²⁸ Kristeva, 2

²⁹ Kanai, “Ai no seikatsu,” 41–43.

³⁰ Ibid, 45.

³¹ Ibid.

³² In Freudian theory, to experience the “uncanny” is to experience something that is simultaneously familiar and incongruous, and therefore which results in the subject’s cognitive dissonance, and the object’s rejection or repulsion by the subject. For Kristeva, the abject is uncanny because it is something that has been expelled out of society and culture, therefore, it simultaneously contains that which was familiar before it was expelled, and that which is violently rejected.

³³ Kristeva, 3–4.

³⁴ Kanai, “Ai no seikatsu,” 44.

³⁵ Ibid, 46.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Kristeva, 15.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Kanai, “Ai no seikatsu,” 33.

⁴¹ The use of the initial “F” in Kanai’s early novellas, including *Love Life*, has been commented upon by several critics who have attempted to determine F’s meaning. In “Usagi: Hito to bungaku,” Kitada Sachie argues that the death of Kanai’s father when she was just five years old, and the consequent immovable “sensation of lack” that it produced, led Kanai to immerse herself in the world of fiction and fantasy. For Kitada, Kanai’s protagonist’s search for “F” (or in other stories “P”) thus pertains to Kanai’s search for her lost, or physically absent “Father” or “Papa.” Citing Kanai’s own words on the loss of her father, Kitada states that the eternal lover is the manifestation of the “physiological vacuum and lack” (*nikutaiteki kūhaku to ketsujo*) in Kanai’s life, and constitutes

a very personal motive for writing. In contrast, Shibusawa Tatsuhiko in *Kanai Mieko: Zentanpenshū*, vol. 1 (Tokyo: Nihon bungeisha, 1992), writes that Kanai's trope of the eternal lover (within which category he includes F in *Love Life*) constitutes a metaphor for her philosophy on language. This eternal lover, or "object of love" (*aisuru taishō*) is absent, not always because s/he has "disappeared, become separated or died" in the past, but sometimes because s/he constitutes an image of a person in the future, an eternal lover who has not yet been met, but who knows one intimately. This image produces a sudden realization, like an epiphany, that one has again discovered that which is already known. Moreover, he argues, Kanai's use of this trope draws on surrealist images and principles, according to which "absence" (*fuzai*) is simultaneously "presence" (*jitsuzai*). Thus, the eternal lover in Kanai's texts facilitates the exploration of various relationships between self and other without ever becoming repetitive or two-dimensional.

⁴² Although there is no space to argue this point in this article, it is my contention that "F" can be understood as corresponding to *both* "father" and "fiction" (or "fuzai" as Shibusawa puts forward) through a reading of Kristeva's concept of the "imaginary father," which works as a drive to facilitate the child's transition into the symbolic order through the love of the mother.

⁴³ Kanai, "Ai no seikatsu," 51.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

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