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A/Void Pregnancy? Yagi Emi's *Kūshin techō* and Fake Pregnancy as a Means of Exploring Women's Struggles

Anna Specchio

Introduction

The Sixteenth Japanese National Fertility Survey conducted by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (IPSS) in June 2021 among unmarried men and women, and married women, showed that, for the first time in the survey's history, "the most common response for the ideal 'women's life course' was 'balancing work and child-rearing' for both men and women," and that even though there has been a decline in the average number of women choosing "child-rearing and education is too costly" as the reason for not having their desired number of children, it "remains the most commonly chosen reason."[1] Other equally telling results regarding women's work-life balance have emerged from another survey conducted by the Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office in 2018 and published in 2019. According to this survey, while the percentage of women who stay in the workforce after having their first child has increased, reaching a record figure of 53.1%, the percentage of women leaving their jobs remains high at 46.9%.[2]

Alongside these official reports, sociologists and other academics have responded with their own research showing that other reasons underlying women's struggle to balance a career with motherhood are related to economic inequality or instability, and social pressure, which are tied to the social phenomenon of *matahara* (マタハラ), that is, "maternity harassment."[3] *Matahara* refers to the unfair treatment of a person due to their pregnancy in the workplace or other environments, which eventually leads them to postpone or avoid pregnancy, or to interrupt their jobs for marriage or childbirth/childrearing.[4] Indeed, more than 70% of pregnant women eventually choose such interruptions[5] to pursue stay-at-home motherhood, an ideal promoted by Japanese policies.[6] To use Tachibanaki Toshiaki's words, what emerges is that "the major turning point in a

woman's life is not marriage, but pregnancy and childbearing … in other words, the societal focus has shifted to the problem of having children and deciding whether to quit working or to stay in the labor force."[7] Yet there are other important issues, such as society's hostile healthcare system, and inadequate maternity and childcare leave, that contribute to discussions of pregnancy and working women.[8]

Given declining birthrates and growing difficulties in sustaining gestations to term, it should come as no surprise that, in Japan, the past two decades have seen "a renewed interest in and reflection upon the themes of pregnancy and childbearing," which have been touched upon across a variety of genres, from "pure" literature (純文学 *jun bungaku*) and popular literature (大衆文学 *taishū bungaku*) to speculative fiction, as well as diaries.[9] Whilst in Japan the recent emergence of such "pregnancy literature" is strictly connected with the above-mentioned issues, it is worth mentioning that the same years have seen an explosion of contemporary women's writing from across the globe that engages with issues such as motherhood, illness, disease, healthcare, medical practice, and clinical institutions. In Japan, women writing so-called "pure" or "popular" literature in these decades have often mirrored the mental and physical changes that women experience during pregnancy. They have emphasized the private reflections of female protagonists, focusing on their bodily transformations and semi-mythologized images of their lives after delivery, or their actual attitudes as mothers. These attitudes either adhere to the childcare-focused ideal of the mother as promoted by Japanese society, or reflect a more subversive attitude, illustrated in works such as Kawakami Mieko's *Chichi to ran* (Breasts and eggs, 2008) and *Natsu monogatari* (2019, translated as *Breast and Eggs*, 2020), Kakuta Mitsuyo's *Yōkame no semi* (2007, translated as *The Eighth Day*, 2010), and Kanehara Hitomi's *Mazāzu* (Mothers, 2011).[10] On the other hand, women writing speculative fiction barely touch upon personal thoughts or bodily changes, and instead focus on future or alternative societies where pregnancy is not only a female matter: within such societies, men can be involved through reproductive technologies, and childcare is outsourced to state-run centers and managed by the entire community. This fiction proposes a gender-role-free model of pregnancy and childrearing, and prominent examples of such writing include Murata Sayaka's *Shōmetsu sekai* (2015, translated ad *Vanishing World*, 2025) and *Satsujin shussan* (Breeders and Killers, 2014), Ono Miyuki's *Pyua* (Pure, 2020), and Koyata Natsuki's *Rirīsu* (Release, 2016).[11] Such speculative fiction

dealing with inclusive pregnancies and childcare should be interpreted as a strong critique of contemporary Japanese society and its outdated system of care and assistance where all responsibility, even that of remedying the declining birthrate, is entrusted to women.[12]

As Amanda C. Seaman points out, pregnancy, which can be interpreted as "an alien creature growing inside a woman's body, sucking the life from her, parasitical and potentially horrific," is material for great literature.[13] However, stories about pregnancy can be extremely boring: "[d]ue to modern medical procedures and technologies, aside from the occasional bout of uterine bleeding, there are rarely any dramatic health scares that make for interesting fiction, particularly in the gestational period; all the drama is in the birth."[14] However, Seaman further explains that recent novels "reveal that Japanese women also are beginning to think about pregnancy in a new way … Boldly expressing the anxieties, joys, and contradictions arising from becoming a mother in millennial Japan."[15]

It is precisely in the context of millennial Japan that the writer Yagi Emi 八木詠美 (b. 1988) made her literary debut with *Kūshin techō* 空芯手帳 (2020, translated as *Diary of a Void*, 2022), which won the 36th Dazai Osamu Prize.[16] With its ironic, fun, and provocative tones, the novel addresses maternal issues and critically examines current motherhood and childcare practices in the form of a diary, where personal remarks intersect with the description of several other pregnant women. Written in a fluid and direct style, *Kūshin techō* is the story of Shibata, a thirty-four-year-old unmarried "office lady" working at a company that manufactures paper tubes. Shibata is dissatisfied with the daily grind of serving coffee and doing other miscellaneous and unproductive tasks and complains about the unreasonableness of her all-male (and, at least at the beginning, chauvinistic) workplace. To find meaning in her daily life, she lies and tells her coworkers she is pregnant. The narration pivots around Shibata's daily life, and while readers are pleased with the funny episodes she narrates and are curious to learn how she will disguise her pregnancy without being discovered, they also witness other women's experiences and realize that most of the tales around maternity and childrearing are idealized. As the narration of Shibata's journey to delivery develops, the boundaries between the lie and the truth, the unconscious and the conscious, the dream and the reality blur, and female interiority, as well as private thoughts and desires, emerge, enabling the protagonist to find new room for herself.

In this paper, I shall argue that Yagi Emi advances a critique of the condition of Japanese women in contemporary Japan. More specifically,

the use of the fake pregnancy and the diary as a narrative strategy serve as a means of exploring contradictions and gender gaps that women face during pregnancy, in the workplace, and at home—such as *sekuhara* (セクハラ sexual harassment) and *matahara* (mother harassment), social pressure, prejudice and stigma, and economic inequality—as well as sisterhood among women. Moreover, I propose that Shibata's embodied experience as a single mother can be read as an example of what Hélène Cixous defines as *écriture féminine*, a woman's writing which does not draw upon phallocentrism, and instead comes to life as a woman liberates her creativity via the act of writing.

S/mothering Japanese Women

Kūshin techō can be read as a parody of the Maternal and Child Health Handbook (母子健康手帳 *boshi kenkō techō*, hereafter MCHH), the booklet that the Ministry of Health and Welfare of Japan has been distributing to all mothers-to-be since 1947.[17] The suggestion is clear from the Japanese title, where the word *techō* (手帳 handbook) is used along with the term *kūshin* (空芯), which literally means 'void,' but whose Chinese characters consist of those for 'sky/empty' (空) and 'core' (芯). The 'void,' in this sense, can be interpreted as both a reference to Shibata's uterus, and to the empty cores of the tubes produced by the company Shibata works for as an "office lady" (OL in Japanese) that symbolize her solitude—I will return to this aspect later.

In describing the MCHH, Motohashi Rie quotes Sugiyama Yoshihiro's statement on the use Michel Foucault makes of the term "technology," describing it as a "mechanism that can act on our bodies and language, transforming them and producing and reproducing 'social bodies,'"[18] and proposes that the handbook is a form of technology that "acts on the owner's body through the act of reading, writing, showing, and referring to it from the time of conception through infancy, producing and maintaining desirable and good child-rearers."[19] She subsequently defines the MCHH as a device that is able to make mothers aware of their role as caregivers.

With regard to Yagi Emi's "diary/handbook," I would rather focus on what Foucault describes as the fourth of the "technologies of the self"; technologies that "permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection,

or immortality."[20] Indeed, writing her diary (and, thus, being pregnant, as a non-pregnant woman would not have a copy of the handbook) offers Shibata a means of untangling herself from the role of a demeaning and worthless worker that her company has foisted upon her. The diary as a technology of the self, however, allows Shibata to gain a new sense of *agency*, as she works on her soul, body, and thoughts in order to transform herself into a person that matters.

The parodic orientation of the novel is clear from its very beginning. While literature regarding pregnancy and motherhood tends to focus on the fears and anxieties that women experience and share with their partners, and childbearing is described as a fantastical enterprise, *Kūshin techō* shows a single mother who writes in her diary how *she*, alone, feels as she returns home.[21] She does not even mention her physical state nor the condition of the fetus, a requirement of the Maternal and Child Health Handbook, given its function as a record of both the mother's and the child's health data. The reason for this is the fake nature of Shibata's pregnancy, which readers discover a few lines later when she announces how she became pregnant, that is, as a reaction to her work environment. As her section head grumbled over the cups they used during the meeting, she ignores him until he clearly asks her to wash them:

> "Shibata."
> The section head was right behind me. I felt I could see the cigarette smoke.
> "Shibata, the coffee cups are still out. The cups in the meeting room."
> Oh. Okay. …
> What I did wasn't supposed to be an act of rebellion – more like a little experiment. I was curious. I wanted to see if it even occurred to any of my coworkers, maybe somebody who'd actually been in the meeting, to clean up …. I think I just wanted to know what would happen if nobody was there to keep an eye out, to rush over as soon as the meeting ended and deal with the messes they'd made….
> "Excuse me!" I said as my section head walked by, no doubt on his way to the break room. He had his mug and a tea bag. Lately he'd been obsessed with medicinal tea.
> "Do you think you could take care of the cups today?"
> "Huh?"
> "I can't do it."
> "Why? What's going on?"
> "I'm pregnant. The smell of coffee … it triggers my morning sickness. The cigarettes, too …. Anyway, isn't this supposed to be a nonsmoking building?"
> And that's how I became pregnant.[22]

Unlike other novels where pregnancy is wanted and awaited with excitement, and where the aspiring mother chronicles the strategies she and her partner adopted to have a baby, like Kawakami Mieko's *Kimi wa akachan* (You are a baby, 2014)—as Seaman shows in her contribution to this special issue—*Kūshin techō* lacks every form of intimacy and gives maternity a very different meaning, departing from a couple's choice to become parents. Here, pregnancy is not an active process in the sense that the couple tries their best to ensure that the woman is pregnant, but is instead active in the sense that single protagonist Shibata engages in it to free herself from humiliating and time-consuming tasks, and to achieve a sense of empowerment.

Shibata's idea to invent her pregnancy serves both as a narrative strategy to keep readers engaged as they wonder how she will fake her bodily transformations and as a crucial societal critique. In Japanese society, single mothers are usually divorced women, and births outside marriage are very low, underscoring "the continuing stigma, as well as the wide-ranging social and economic repercussions, particularly associated with becoming an unmarried mother in Japan," and emphasizing women's role in childrearing.[23]

However, what strongly emerges in the first pages is another form of harassment that Shibata experiences in her working environment. Her boss and coworkers tend to call for, and as words are symbols for meaning, to identify, Shibata with the objects they want her to take care of. In the abovementioned extract, her boss calls her "Cups," but there are other occurrences. As Shibata narrates her work duties, she writes that these involve some unnamed additional tasks that no one has explained are hers, as "it was simply assumed."[24] Moreover, as she does not take care of them, her colleagues start calling her by the objects that she is supposed to be responsible for, such as "cups," "microwaves," or "coffee."[25]

Her colleagues' repetitive identification of Shibata with the objects associated with her presumed tasks and their assumption that she stops working in order to handle them, can be interpreted as a form of gender-based work harassment, underpinned by the assumption that women passively accept discrimination for their being "bound by traditional roles," and inscribed in the realm of the domestic sphere, rather than in that of the workplace.[26] This representation mirrors the Japanese social construct of men as breadwinners and women as full-time housewives or "office flowers" (職場の花 *shokuba no hana*), developed at the time of the economic miracle of the 1980s. In those years, as many scholars have

noted, working women largely occupied clerical and secretarial roles. However, as Ogasawara notes, office ladies were often expected to perform additional chores:

> [They were] also usually responsible for such chores as serving tea to their male colleagues or company visitors, wiping the surfaces of desks with wet towels, and receiving telephone calls …. Perhaps because their work seems wholly superficial and non-productive, some say that OLs' major contribution to the office lies in their presence. Indeed, OLs were once frequently called "office flowers," implying that they served a decorative function.[27]

In the novel, the unmarried Shibata is depicted as one of the many "office flowers" who decorate Japanese offices, and Yagi Emi's decision to give her a common surname and no given name could be interpreted as a wish to mirror a very common situation among Japanese working women: every woman in the same situation could see herself in Shibata. Indeed, the issue of working women being relegated to minor, unproductive roles, especially that of the "tea-pourer" (お茶汲み *ochakumi*) has been discussed by several feminists, as it represents an obstacle to women's careers. As Yuko Fukuma explains: "If a woman said she would refuse to participate in *ochakumi*, there was a chance she would not be hired. If she replied she would, this became a sort of declaration of intent. In any case, she would feel considerable pressure."[28] Even though the practice of *ochakumi* and the ideal of "office flower" have been abolished in most companies, gender-based harassment in the workplace remains an issue,[29] and even today only a limited number of women occupy a managerial position.[30]

Nevertheless, once Shibata declares that she is pregnant—and starts writing her "diary/handbook," thus liberating her creativity—she ceases to be called by the names of objects. This is because she ceases to be a "normal woman" and instead becomes a "mother," as if a mother is the ideal woman, the quintessence of femininity. This assumption, again, is rooted in the Japanese myth of maternalism, which accentuated the equation of womanhood with motherhood, creating a "mythology of the mother," and which, again, is intimately related to the dichotomy of men as agents of production, and women as agents of reproduction.[31] Thus, motherhood becomes the main marker of gender difference. Genaro Castro-Vázquez uses the term "motherhoodism" to describe the ideology that revolves around "womanhood as motherhood," and argues that it is

the immediate descendent of maternalism. [32] "Motherhoodism," he explains, "well and still encompasses a standard against which the 'normal' gendered and sexual self of a woman is compared,"[33] and well reflects Japanese society's devotion to that concept which, borrowing Ohinata's words, "comes close to that of a religious faith."[34]

Hence, when Shibata becomes pregnant and trespasses into the realm of "motherhood," she automatically enters the realm of "womanhood." This means that as a simple, unmarried office lady without children, she was not recognized as a woman by her boss and male coworkers. And this is precisely why she was a "cup," a "microwave," or a "coffee," in other words, an object without any individual value. Therefore, her declaration of pregnancy, and her subsequent notetaking about her gestation in her "diary/handbook," becomes foremost a technology of the self in order to gain social status. Smothered as a woman, Shibata becomes an agent in society as she places herself on the ground of reproduction. It is no coincidence that her existence is recorded precisely by her "diary/handbook." As already mentioned, the MCCH handbook is given only to pregnant women. Before writing her diary, Shibata simply did not exist.

Absences, Coming to Life, Leaks, and Lies

French feminist writer and theorist Hélène Cixous considers a woman's act of writing as the starting point of a journey to find her new self. She points out that, as male-dominated narratives have associated female sexuality with "darkness," a woman should dream in the dark so as to be reborn and awaken her inner desires. [35] What she defines as *écriture féminine* is a form of writing that is free from male-dominated cultural inscriptions, including patriarchal linguistic structures, that women use to dismantle existing dichotomies, and to be reborn as new women. It is a style of expression that puts women's bodily experiences into language. According to Cixous, a woman should refuse the roles that patriarchal society has assigned to her, and to do so she must write, that is, create a new space for herself. In the essay "Coming to Writing" Cixous describes the necessity of practicing "giving birth"—writing—every day. "I give birth. I enjoy giving births," she declares, and goes further in order to remind herself of the need to use her creativity:

> Writing: as if I had the urge to go on enjoying, to feel full, to push, to feel the force of my muscles, and my harmony, to be pregnant and at the same time to give myself the joys of parturition, the joys of both the mother and

> the child. To give birth of myself and to nurse myself, too. …
> Another day, I have a child. This child is not a child. It was perhaps a plant, or an animal. I falter. Thus, everything happened as if what I had always imagined were reproduced in reality. Produced reality. What is the difference between the human and the nonhuman? Between life and nonlife? Is there a "limit"? …
> I bring myself before the judge: "You want to produce a text when you are incapable of producing a child properly? First, you must take your text again."[36]

From the moment Shibata begins writing her diary, her life changes as if to underscore her birth as a new woman. Yagi starts the narration in the fifth week of pregnancy, when Shibata leaves work earlier than usual and is fascinated by the freshness of the products that she finds at the supermarket in the afternoon, and by the amount of spare time she enjoys. She declares:

> For a while I just lay there on the imitation wood floor, giving myself over to the familiar coolness, relieved to be out of the oppressive heat. Late summer was still dragging on—I was bored with being bored with it. When I lifted my head, I saw the sun still shining through at the other end of the room. A vision of paradise.
> So this is pregnancy. What luxury. What loneliness.[37]

Instead of experiencing the reduction of her working time as a form of *matahara*, in that it limits the opportunity for female workers to perform their tasks, Shibata describes her abundance of free time as a luxury (贅沢 *zeitaku*) which allows her to lie down on the floor and do nothing. At the same time, as she gazes at the filtered sunset, just as if she is watching a miraculous light descend on her life, she showcases another feature of her new daily routine: she has no one to share her condition with; her pregnancy is also loneliness (孤独 *kodoku*). From this loneliness, however, springs a new will to take care of herself—driven by the excuse of caring for the baby in her belly, as if Shibata is lying to herself too. Surprising herself as a *flâneuse*, she manages to "keep walking pretty much every day," without a goal, just for the pleasure of enjoying the neighborhood, discovering new places in the light of day that she would be unable to see if she were working, and meeting people—including a woman with a red jacket "carrying the real thing, a real bay inside."[38] Moreover, when she downloads one of the many apps intended to help pregnant women track their diet and habits—another technology of the self—she begins cooking

for herself in a healthy, balanced manner as if her life "depended on it."[39] Consulting the app and writing in her diary: Shibata's new routine helps her find a new way of life that she had not previously known. It is worth noting that Shibata's new routine is born from her "death" (she is no longer a non-pregnant woman), and from an "absence" (that of the fetus). In other words, she starts from what Cixous states is fundamental for women in giving themselves new births: "Writing – begins–, without you, without I, without law, without knowing, without light, without hope, without bonds, without anyone close *to* you."[40]

In Shibata's story, it is possible to identify two main absences: the first is, needless to say, that of the baby in the womb, but the other is that of the father of the baby. According to the most traditional image of a woman within Japanese society, the father would have been Shibata's husband, or, at least, male partner. The entire novel revolves around Shibata narrating her embodied experiences as a mother-to-be, but the reader never hears of a possible male partner. Indeed, Shibata even talks with an image of the Virgin Mary that she meets during one of her walks, as if she sees herself, or a model for herself, in that image. The absence of a male partner throughout the narrative further supports the thesis of *Kūshin techō* being an *écriture féminine*, a space that is uniquely "feminine."

However, these two absences lead Shibata to face the two main issues of her "void" pregnancy. The first is connected to the problems of disguising her fake pregnancy by mimicking the two main proofs of the pregnant body, namely the growing belly and the absence of menstruation. The second regards the prejudice and stigma surrounding unmarried pregnant women in the workplace.

The issues associated with disguising the pregnancy come into Shibata's new reality when her male coworker Higashinakano asks her why her belly has not grown yet. To fully understand the stages a woman experiences during the prenatal period, Shibata uses the app, which shows the growing stages of the maternal body and the fetus. She subsequently attempts to recreate a prominent belly using eighty pairs of denier winter tights. In the app, the size of the baby is always compared to a type of fruit, such as a small plum, an apricot, or a grapefruit.[41] Although the fruit comparison used in the app to represent the fetus reminds us of the biological nature of the fetus growing in the belly, in the case of Shibata, her uterus is empty. Or, at least, this is what readers still understand at this stage of the narration. This belief is reinforced when Shibata informs us that her uterus's reproductive functions are regular, since she has her

period during the thirteenth week, when she is at work and concerned only about hiding her tampons and painkillers from Higashinakano. While the physiological phenomenon of menstruation is generally taken to be a woman's most intimate embodied experience as well as her fertility marker—and the reason women are labeled the main actors in the reproduction process—that leak of blood also represents a failure to conceive. In this regard, anthropologist Emily Martin states that menstruation "not only carries with it the connotation of a productive system that has failed to produce, it also carries the idea of production gone awry, making products of no use, not to specification, unsalable, wasted, scrap."[42]

Nevertheless, whereas menstruation causes anxiety for a woman hoping to become a mother, the seeds of Shibata's anxiety are rooted in her lie. Yagi's discourse on menstruation pivots around Shibata's concern about hiding her experience from coworkers. But what precisely that experience is, is willingly left ambiguous. Shibata writes that it is just "something" that "almost imperceptibly … speed[s] out" of her, something that "explains the weird chills" she has had all morning, and that "wasn't supposed to be happening" to her.[43]

In fact, the word "menstruation" is never mentioned in the text, and what seems to be the proof of Shibata's period remains nameless:

> I didn't want anybody thinking I'd had a miscarriage or an abnormal bleed. Or do pregnant women use pads anyway, when…? I should have looked into that.
>
> As I wondered how I was going to pull this off, I felt something falling inside me. A warm, soft mass. Something like the innards of a dissected bird…A vision of the chicken liver I'd eaten last week flickering before my eyes, I headed straight for the elevator.
>
> I didn't think I was doing that bad. Not at all. Especially for someone who was losing blood at that moment.[44]

The only information the reader receives of that unnamed experience is that blood is certainly leaking from Shibata's body. What is the nature of the "warm, soft mass" that Shibata is describing? That "something" like the "innards of a dissected bird?" This bird comparison can be interpreted as a comparison with an egg-producing animal, to signify that Shibata has lost her egg, her unfertilized egg. Why should the reader not think she is having a miscarriage? Shibata seems unconscious of and unprepared for what is happening to her, and the fear that other people might think she is

having a miscarriage or suffering from abnormal bleeding can also be interpreted as Shibata's own thinking, or her true embodied experience. This, as far as this narration is concerned, can be interpreted as a lie within a lie. Or is Shibata merely so afraid of experiencing a miscarriage that she neglects that possibility? Or, maybe, it is just "nothing," as she explains to her coworker Higashinakano when she comes back to her desk. "It's okay. It's nothing," as nothing exists inside her fetus, as nothing is truth, as nothing is real.[45] Regardless of what the true nature of this leakage of blood is, Shibata goes further with her first lie (the pregnancy), and does not mention further episodes of this kind, nor does the narration touch upon them or suggest the presence of additional episodes of menstruation as the date of delivery approaches. On the contrary, as Shibata carries on with her fake pregnancy, she presents new scenarios that hint at the possibility of her pregnancy being real, with the period of the thirteenth week being abnormal uterine bleeding instead of menstruation. I will return to the "maybe-not-fake" nature of Shibata's pregnancy later, as my intention here is to consider the stigma surrounding single mothers in Japan.

The prejudice against unmarried mothers becomes apparent to the reader as Shibata is involved in one of the year-end parties, "forget-the-year" party or *bōnenkai* (忘年会) in Japanese, that her colleagues organize. This kind of drinking party serves as a social gathering for workers, and is intended to bring workers closer together, facilitate negotiations, and create what Eyal Ben-Ari terms "temporary groups."[46] These groups create a new frame within which people "often deliberate violations of conventional manners and etiquette."[47] In Yagi's novel, Shibata's coworkers break their conventional manners and etiquette when they share the table with her, and, aided by alcohol, begin to air their thoughts or prejudices, about her and her pregnancy. One of them defines her pregnancy as "the shock of the year," repeatedly stating that "it's just hard to wrap my head around it. It's so weird to think of you being pregnant. I mean, I've never heard you say anything about love or marriage. That's why it was such a surprise to find out that you've been…getting out there, you know? Having a life."[48]

As exaggerated as the reaction of Shibata's coworker may seem, it clearly mirrors social expectations in Japan. Pregnant women are expected to be married and to talk about their private plans to acquiesce to the traditional narrative about motherhood, which seems to persist in Japanese society even though the "myth of the mother" has been dismantled by

feminist scholars. The stigma over single mothers had also emerged in a previous episode in Shibata's diary:

> Every time I took a break, they'd let me pass. Every time I took a break, they'd ask if I was okay. But they said nothing else. No "Congrats!," no "Is it a boy or a girl?" I could only assume that was because I wasn't married.[49]

In the same *bōnenkai*, once her colleagues have voiced their curiosities, Shibata expresses her concerns regarding her rights to the financial support the company gives future mothers since she is unmarried. During her prenatal experience, although the reader is conscious of the fake nature of her pregnancy, Shibata narrates that since her working hours have been reduced and her spare time has increased, her expenses under the headings "medical treatments" and "entertainment" have doubled. According to Aya Ezawa, "one of the main issues facing single mothers in Japan [is] the fact that full-time employment does not guarantee a living wage."[50] Shibata also faces this issue, as she seems to be worried about how to survive during maternity leave as she will not be able to receive any bonus while having to think about the expenses for her and the newborn.

The absence of the father in Yagi's narrative, then, can be interpreted both as an instrument that introduces the issue of single mothers' financial status and as a form of resistance to the male-constructed myth of maternity, "maternalism," and "motherhoodism." At the same time, it reinforces the nature of this writing, its belonging to the *écriture féminine*, independent of the phallic presence.

The Pregnancy is Fake, but the Struggle is Real

Despite her colleagues' prejudices, the bleeding incident, and her financial status, Shibata decides to carry on with her act, and, perhaps driven by loneliness and the "void" in her daily life—which in the novel emerges also via the metaphor of the empty tubes her company produces—she decides to take part in a prenatal aerobics course to maintain her physical form. At the gym she befriends a group of real pregnant women who have created a sort of mutual-support group, and whose relationships are based on the concepts of "sisterhood" and "networking" strengthened by the fourth wave of feminism. As Seaman notes, "the Internet has seen an increasing number of blogs in which pregnant women talk about their own lives as well as share health and shopping advice."[51] However, even though "the renaissance of sisterhood … benefited from the development of the on-line 'free' zones on the Internet" that facilitate the quick and easy

sharing of information across time and space and, therefore, work on an intersectional level, in Yagi's novel the phenomenon is limited to this group of pregnant women that Shibata approaches, and revolves around the LINE group that they have created to stay in touch and share concerns, ideas, and photographs of their children.[52] Consequently, the voices of these women circulate on a strictly private level, and do not reach, nor are they intended to reach, the political level of dissemination. Nevertheless, their mutual support highlights the struggles that are faced by pregnant women in Japan. This network succinctly and effectively showcases the suffering that social pressure imposes on married mothers who, in Japanese society, are "encouraged to satisfy the child's desire for love and security through close physical contact, which involves prolonged breastfeeding, co-sleeping, and co-bathing."[53] In other words, mothers in Japan are seen as being responsible for everything and, as already mentioned, are culturally molded within a mythologized sphere where the "dark sides" of maternity, including worry, exasperation, and depression, are always ignored.[54] For instance, public debates rarely deal with issues such as enrolling children in daycare centers or kindergartens (a process that is frequently described as a "lottery") or having to reserve prenatal visits and book delivery times with the hospital in advance (the so-called 分娩予約 *bunben yoyaku*).[55]

The pregnant women whom Shibata meets share their difficulties, both in terms of timing and high costs. Their complaints revolve around the care system, the same system that has foregrounded the role of mothers in maternity and childrearing, exempting fathers, and men in general, from any discourse of care. Of particular relevance is a monologue delivered by a female character named Hosono a few weeks after childbirth. She meets Shibata walking in the streets at night. Hosono suffers from postpartum depression, a trope barely approached in narrations of pregnancy and motherhood, and she is trying to comfort her crying baby. Shibata makes a comment about how cute the baby is, but this only causes Hosono to explode:

> "Everybody says so. 'You must be so happy,' 'You're so lucky,' 'She has your eyes.' But she doesn't! She's always crying! I can't even get a good look at her face…. She's always crying. She sleeps sometimes. Just for short stretches, but she sleeps. And that's when I need to wash her bottles. They need time to dry. Then I have to do the chores. How does anybody keep this up? Are they superhuman or what? Am I supposed to hang the piles of laundry and do all the cleaning while carrying this kid the whole

time? …

The real problem is my husband. What good is he? At night, when Yuri's crying, he gets all pissed off about how he has to go to work in the morning. Actually, I wish he'd get pissed off more. Always tries to hold it in. And that really pisses me off. I can tell how mad he is, but he acts like he's so understanding. Yeah right. I mean, if you understand, why don't you do anything to help out on weekends? Why do I have to bring Yuri outside in the middle of the night like this? And don't you dare sigh at me. Not that long, stupid sigh again. Don't act like you're doing a great job because you managed to get her to fall asleep once. You say you're gonna buy her something really cute from Baby Depot, so I ask you to pick up some sweat pads for me while you're there, and then you come back all proud about the outfit you got her, even though it's way, way, way too big… And what about the sweat pads I needed? Ugh! What I wouldn't give to sleep for, like, a solid thirty minutes!"[56]

With her monologue, Hosono gives voice to all the silent, suffering mothers whose babies and husbands behave in ways that are contrary to the mainstream narrative of the ideal family, and whose experience of motherhood is therefore very challenging. Far from this ideal, as Hosono continues, her words highlight the gendered reality of parenthood, in which all duties tend to fall upon the shoulders of the woman.

"Sure, he helps and all, but he's still basically a stranger."

"A stranger?"

"Yeah, his part was simple, right? All he had to do was ejaculate. After that, my body took care of the rest. I got bigger, I threw up, sometimes I couldn't even move. Sure, sometimes he'd notice and offer support. And, yeah, he cried when Yuri was born, but as far as he's concerned, he just came inside me, then months later here was this baby girl. I know women are the only ones who can give birth, but once the baby's born, why the hell should our roles be so different? Breastfeeding, I get, but what about everything else? Don't tell me you need more time to figure out how to be a dad. Like, what have you been doing for the last nine months? Don't just sit there and watch. This isn't a field trip! You say you've got to work, but what about me? I've got work, too! Well, I did. I know it paid nothing compared to what you make … anyway, isn't that what paternity leave is for?[57]

Hosono's reference to giving birth and breastfeeding as a woman's prerogative is based on biological differences and is addressed to all those people assigned female at birth whose embodied experiences are a result

of their physical body. However, her claim for an equal and non-gender-based childcare policy is inclusive and intersectional. She touches upon the question of work and salary differences, as well as paternity leave, which remains an issue: even though Japan has one of the most generous paternity leave policies of industrialized countries, in fact, relatively few fathers take advantage of it due to the social bias that, for men, careers ought to come first.[58]

Returning to the plot of the novel, the reality of Hosono's problems immediately collides with (or meets) the reaction of Shibata, who responds by once again drawing the reader's attention to the reality of her lie. After hearing Hosono's outburst, Shibata encourages her to have a place of her own "even if it's a lie," and explains her strategy:

> "…And that's why I'm going to keep the lie."
> "Keep the lie?" …
> "Even if it's a lie, it's a place of my own. That's why I'm going to keep it. It doesn't need to be a big lie – just big enough for one person. And if I can hold on to that lie inside my heart, if I can keep repeating it to myself, it might lead me somewhere. Somewhere else, somewhere different. If I can do that, maybe I'll change a little, and maybe the world will, too."[59]

The wording here is ambiguous. Readers cannot tell whether Shibata's lie refers to the fact that she is faking her pregnancy, or to the fact that her pregnancy is real and that she is evading reality by creating a counterfeited image of a non-pregnant self. In any case, why would an unmarried office lady lie about a pregnancy?

The Void Which Guarantees the Self

To answer the above question, it is crucial to consider the title of the novel and its meaning. The "void" (空芯 *kūshin*) used in the title refers to both the empty cores produced at the manufacturing company where Shibata works and that she observes moving through the rolling machine, and to the inside of Shibata's womb where there seems to be no fetus, as well as to the status of the Maternal and Child Health Handbook that Shibata will not fill in. Similarly, rereading the pages of Shibata's diary, it is possible to notice multiple references to loneliness and emptiness. The reader is reminded from the very beginning that pregnancy is a "luxury," and a "loneliness," and as Shibata befriends other pregnant women, what emerges is a new reference to the feeling of loneliness that every pregnant woman feels, albeit each one differently. Shibata's loneliness, as well as

that of pregnant women, is something so private and intimate that, analyzed through the lens of *écriture feminine*, can be compared to an empty canvas on which to draw women's subjectivity. This empty canvas comes to life as a reaction to the creation and maintenance of a place so private that no man could inscribe culturally constructed and/or determined roles or expectations, the "rigid concepts, little cages of meaning assigned" that Cixous refers to.[60] Pressure exerted on pregnant women, those miraculous women whose identity is created, augmented, and mythologized by social constructs, resolves into the absence of privacy, their bodies and experiences being exposed, with no one else actually able to understand their feelings or willing to do so. In the context of Japan, under the overrated conception of motherhood "and its attendant ideas about women's role concerning childrearing, little effort has been made to see that people other than the mother participate in the childrearing process."[61] Consequently, even when Shibata meets Hosono, and Hosono shares her experience, Shibata's response is to state that each and every embodied experience is unique and that no third person will ever be able to put themselves in another's shoes.

> And there are a lot of people – husbands, parents-in-law, even your own parents – who say horrible things that make you want to say, "Fine, let's trade places." But they can't. They can never take your place. They can't even understand you. Because they are not you …
>
> But why do I have to deal with these people who try to act like they care about me or my pregnancy while they ask me the most insane, prying questions? Why is it up to me to produce answers that please them? And why is the way home so much darker and colder on nights like that? ... I'm so alone. I'm sorry – this has nothing to do with how hard things are for you, Hosono. But I'm always alone. I guess I should be used to it by now. That's the way it is from the moment we come into this world, but I'm still not used to it—how alone we all are.[62]

Cixous states that writing is necessary to "make room for the wandering question that haunts" the soul, to give it a place and a time.[63] With regard to why Shibata decides to tell her co-workers that she is pregnant, perhaps this serves as a response to that feeling that Shibata experiences in her daily life, one of a void, or loneliness, or absence. Perhaps Shibata seeks to feel complete through her lie, which then begs the question, why are women only considered women once they become pregnant?

As explained, the immediate trigger for the lie is Shibata's attempt to

protect herself from the sexualized and demotivating reality that she is working in. At the office, her boss and her colleagues do not ask her to clean the microwave or the coffee cups because she is the best cleaner on the floor, but rather because she is a woman—a form of *sekuhara*. Thus, the void fetus in her womb, that she names Sorato (using the Chinese characters of "void/sky" 空 and "person" 人), becomes a guarantee of self and self-esteem. By becoming a mother, Shibata finally feels as though her existence is meaningful, as she is producing something for herself instead of continuing to work for a company that makes her feel disposable. Yet, this is another ironic point of the novel: in a society where women tend to postpone or avoid pregnancy to pursue their careers, Shibata creates a void one.

The idea of the fake pregnancy, which as the story develops becomes vague, and the possibility that the protagonist is lying about a void pregnancy in order to cope with her actual unexpected pregnancy, serves as a trick that allows Shibata to work on herself, thus becoming a "technology of the self." In her increased spare time, she exercises, eats healthy food, goes to prenatal appointments (where the doctor cannot tell whether the pregnancy is real or not, as if he were participating in the sham), and studies to pass an exam which could help her to change her job—a fact that, again, is linked to the welfare of unmarried mothers. In a country where marriage is seen as a confirmation of a woman's social status and stay-at-home motherhood is pursued, in fact, "the incidence of job change is considerably higher among single mothers and is motivated by the need to earn a higher income and find more suitable working conditions."[64]

On a snowy evening, Shibata is home alone and thinks about other people's lives. She imagines married couples sharing dinner and other family settings, and declares: "Maybe that's what making a family is all about: creating an environment in which people make space for one another—maybe without even trying, just naturally, to make sure that nobody's forgotten."[65] These words allude to the environment that she has created, where she now lives with Sorato, whether he is a real fetus or not, which serves as a space that guarantees her existence. Sorato's existence nourishes Shibata's. Despite not sharing her discomfort towards her bodily changes in her diary, Shibata is evidently concerned about the transformations that will occur in her life. The lie serves as a source of motivation. It becomes the small hope to cling to, the excuse to improve one's existence. After watching the snow fall, she explains that a new desire has risen in her consciousness:

> I suddenly wanted something of my own, something to make space for. Even if it was just my own and no one else could even see it. Something like a lie. And maybe if I could really hold on to that thing, a snowy night like tonight might become something else, something just a little different.[66]

When Shibata is awakened by contractions in the night, before getting out of bed and putting on her socks, she thinks about what she will have to do once she becomes a mother. Her thoughts are directed to the Virgin Mary, the most mythologized mother in history, and fly to the uncertainty that hovers around motherhood, in all its nuances, ending with a sentence that is also a verdict about women in Japan:

> Anyway, it's May in Japan. That's going to be a big help when I'm looking for daycare. These days, lots of women want to keep working after they have children – sometimes they need to – and they don't have anywhere to put them. It's kind of big deal. They're always talking about it on the news ….
>
> Having a baby isn't easy. Damned if you do, damned if you don't. It's been two thousand years, and it's the same old story, right?
>
> I actually looked into daycare. Into a few different programs and different kinds of support. I'm doing a little better than the last time, right? I guess I figured I might as well make the most of my situation. Even if it's just a lie. The world's what we make it, right? Even if it's just us, on our own—with the whole world against us.[67]

At the heart of Shibata's reflections lies a critical reflection upon the condition of Japanese women, with particular attention to incipient mothers, whose bodies and identities seem to be manipulated by hard-to-erase stigma.

Conclusions

In contrast to most novels dealing with pregnancy where, as Seaman has pointed out, "all the drama is in the birth," *Kūshin techō* does not offer any description of Shibata's labor.[68] After the 40th week there is a blank year, and the narration ends with Shibata returning to the office. In the meantime, coworkers' attitudes seem to have changed a little, as prophesized by Shibata herself in her attempts to reassure Hosono: a male co-worker makes coffee, another cleans, and a job fair is organized to show how wonderful Shibata's company is, employing several working mothers and offering a working program that effectively balances career and private

life. Yet that job fair is addressed solely to female university students, as if, Shibata herself wonders, "work-life balance is something only women need to consider," showing again how polarized the working environment in Japan is.[69]

The difficulty of reconciling work with motherhood, as well as wage gaps and career inequalities, are part of a universal narrative of discrimination. By combining elements of pregnancy novels with women's bodily and working circumstances, the ironic narrative of *Kūshin techō* veils with a thin, translucent patina both societal pressures and women's suffering, suggesting the need for radical change in the treatment of women across all aspects of society, and presents pregnancy as a form of emancipation and empowerment.

In a society where women are encouraged to choose between quitting work or avoiding pregnancy, Yagi Emi's gambit on Shibata's void pregnancy proves to be an excellent device for exploring women's issues in the workplace and society at large. Shibata writes in a disruptive way, uses her embedded experience to sustain herself, and channels her creativity into a tool for survival. To borrow Cixous's words, Shibata's "coming to writing" is akin to a coming to life; she dreams of her deepest desires—a more gender-balanced workplace and society—and gives birth to herself on a weekly basis. She passes through her body's most intimate rooms to find that she has changed a little, and maybe her company and the world have changed too. Even if it is a lie.

NOTES

[1] Sixteenth Japanese National Fertility Survey, National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (hereafter IPSS). https://www.ipss.go.jp/ps-doukou/e/doukou16/Nfs16G_PressRelease_eng.pdf. Accessed March 26, 2023.

[2] Kyodo-Sankaku, Japan Cabinet Office. https://www.gender.go.jp /public/kyodosankaku/2019/201905/pdf/201905.pdf. Accessed March 13, 2023.

[3] See Motohashi Rie, *Bosei no yokuaku to teikō: Kea no riron o tōshite kangaeru senryakuteki bosei shūgi* (Kyoto: Kōyō shobō, 2021); Genaro Castro-Vázquez, *Intimacy and Reproduction in Contemporary Japan* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 41; Toshiaki Tachibanaki, *The New Paradox for Japanese Women: Greater Choice, Greater Inequality*, trans. Mary E. Foster (Tokyo: The

International House of Japan, 2010); Yuko Ogasawara, *Office Ladies and Salaried Men: Power, Gender and Work in Japanese Companies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 62.

[4] See Matahara Net: https://mataharanet.org/en/what-is-matahara/. Accessed March 29, 2024.

[5] See Kumiko Nemoto, "Why Women Won't Wed," in *Beyond the Gender Gap in Japan*, ed. by Gill Steel (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2019); Kyla Ryan, "Maternity Harassment in Japan. Ambitious Japanese Women Struggle to Balance Family and Career," *The Diplomat*, February 11, 2015, https://thediplomat.com/2015/02/maternity-harassment-in-japan/ (Accessed February 27, 2023); Ikeda Shingou, "The Factors of Japanese Female Workers' Job Quitting for Childbirth/Childrearing," *The XVIII ISA World Congress of Sociology RC30 Sociology of Work*, (2014): 1–15; Rupert Wingfield-Hayes, "Japan: The Worst Developed Country for Working Mothers?," *BBC*, March 22, 2013, https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-21880124 (Accessed March 25, 2023).

[6] See Mari Osawa, "Twelve Million Full-Time Housewives: The Gender Consequences of Japan's Postwar Social Contract," in *Social Contracts Under Stress*, eds. Olivier Zunz, Leonard Schoppa, and Nobuhiro Hiwatari (New York: Russel Sage Foundation, 2002), 255–277.

[7] Tachibanaki, *The New Paradox*, 158. In his essay, Tachibanaki states that another issue women face as they choose to continue working after pregnancy is the low number of women in managerial positions, which discourages them from giving their best in the workplace (Tachibanaki, *The New Paradox*, 225).

[8] On this topic see Motohashi, *Bosei no yokuaku to teikō*; Tachibanaki, *The New Paradox for Japanese Women.*

[9] Amanda Seaman, *Writing Pregnancy in Low-Fertility Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017), 13.

[10] Kawakami Mieko 川上未映子 (b. 1976), *Chichi to ran* 乳と卵 (Tokyo: Bungei shunjū, 2008); Kawakami Mieko, *Natsu monogatari* 夏物語 (Tokyo: Bungei shunjū, 2019); Kanehara Hitomi 金原ひとみ (b. 1983), *Mazāzu* マザーズ (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 2011); Kakuta Mitsuyo 角田光代 (b. 1967), *Yōkame no semi* 八日目の蝉 (Tokyo: Chūō kōronsha, 2007).

[11] Murata Sayaka 村田沙耶香 (b. 1979), *Shōmetsu sekai* 消滅世界 (Tokyo: Kawade shobō shinsha, 2015); Murata Sayaka, *Satsujin shussan* 殺人出産 (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2014). The forthcoming translation of *Vanishing World* by Jinny Tapley Takemori has been announced on August 30, 2024. Ono Miyuki 小野美由紀 (b. 1985), *Pyua* ピュア(Tokyo: Hayakawa shobō, 2020). Koyata Natsuki 小谷田奈月 (b. 1981), *Rirīsu* リリース, (Tokyo: Kōbunsha, 2016).

[12] Motohashi, *Bosei no yokuaku to teikō*, 2.

[13] Seaman, *Writing Pregnancy*, 16.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid., 19.

[16] Yagi Emi 八木詠美 (b. 1988), *Kūshin techō* 空芯手帳 (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 2020).

[17] *The Mother and Child Handbook* (*Boshi techō*) was instituted in 1947 and was replaced by the MCHH as a result of the 1966 Law of Maternal and Child Health. The national version of the MCHH consists of forty-nine pages, but since 1991 local governments have been adding information in accordance with their own requirements and needs. See Yoshihide Nakamura, "Maternal and Child Health Handbook in Japan," *JMAJ* 53.4 (2010): 259–265. As Motohashi points out, however, the handbook was first established in 1942 "as a part of the government's population control measures … [and its model was] the Mutterpass, a system of self-portability of maternal health records distributed at maternity hospitals in Germany during the war." (Motohashi, *Bosei no yokuaku to teikō*, 79–80.)

[18] Sugiyama Yoshihiro, "Fōkō ni okeru tekunorojī to riron. Sekushuaritei no gainen o megutte," in *Tetsugaku*, 40: 66, quoted in Motohashi, *Bosei no yokuaku to teikō,* 94.

[19] Motohashi, *Bosei no yokuaku to teikō*, 94.

[20] Michael Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in *Technologies of the Self. A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, eds. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, Patrick H. Hutton, (London: Tavistock Publications, 1988), 18.

[21] See Seaman, *Writing Pregnancy*; Ayako Yoshino, "How Was It in Mummy's Tummy? Japanese Pregnancy Literature," in *Women's Studies International Forum* 31.6 (2008).

[22] Emi Yagi, *Diary of a Void*, trans. David Boyd and Lucy North (London: Harvill Secker, 2022), 2–5.

[23] Aya Ezawa, *Single Mothers in Contemporary Japan. Motherhood, Class, and Reproductive Practice* (Lanham, Maryland.: Lexington Books, 2016), xiv. See also Seaman, *Writing Pregnancy*; Emiko Ochiai and Masako Kamimura, "The Modern Family and Japanese Culture: Exploring the Japanese Mother-Child Relationship," in *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 3.1 (1989), 7–15.

[24] Yagi, *Diary of a Void*, 54.

[25] Ibid., 55.

[26] Ogasawara, *Office Ladies*, 45.

[27] Ibid., 12.

[28] Yuko Fukuma, "Fighting Back Against Serving Tea," in *Voices from the Japanese Women's Movement*, ed. Ampo-Japan Asia Quarterly Review (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 195.

[29] On June 1, 2020, the revised Act on Comprehensively Advancing Labor Measures was promulgated, establishing new measures to prevent different types of harassment. The Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare has published a list of common harassments that includes several forms of power harassment (*pawahara* in Japanese), such as requesting unnecessary tasks, and emotional abuse. The complete list is available (in Japanese) at the following link: https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/seisakunitsuite/bunya/koyou_roudou/koyoukintou/seisaku06/index.html (Accessed March 26, 2023).

[30] Tachibanaki, *The New Paradox*, 225.

[31] Forum Mithani, "(De)Constructing Nostalgic Myths of the Mother in Japanese Drama *Woman*," in *International Journal of TV Serial Narratives* 2 (2019): 73.

[32] Castro-Vázquez, *Intimacy*, 177.

[33] Ibid., 55.

[34] Masami Ōhinata, "The Mystique of Motherhood: A Key to Understanding Social Change and Family Problems in Japan," in *Japanese Women. New Feminist Perspectives on the Past, Present, and Future*, eds. Kumiko Fujimura-Fanselow and Atsuko Kameda (New York: The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1995), 205.

[35] Hélène Cixous' essay "Le Rire de la Méduse" (1975, translated as "The Laugh of Medusa," 1976) focuses on the deconstruction of the connection between femininity and darkness, the latter being the side upon which men have placed women throughout history, a theory endorsed also by Freud.

[36] Hélène Cixous, "Coming to Writing," in *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, ed. Deborah Jenson, trans. Sarah Cornell, et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 30–32.

[37] Yagi, *Diary of a Void*, 2.

[38] Ibid., 67, 66.

[39] Ibid., 44.

[40] Cixous, "Coming to Writing," 38.

[41] Yagi, *Diary of a Void*, 36.

[42] Emily Martin, *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 46.

[43] Yagi, *Diary of a Void*, 26.

[44] Ibid., 27.

[45] Ibid., 28.

[46] Eyal Ben-Ari, "At the Interstices: Drinking, Management, and Temporary Groups in a Local Japanese Organization," *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice* 26 (1989): 56.

[47] Ibid., 54.

[48] Yagi, *Diary of a Void*, 72–74.

[49] Ibid., 15.

[50] Ezawa, *Single Mothers*, vxii.

[51] Seaman, *Writing Pregnancy*, 15.

[52] Lidia Rodak, "Sisterhood and the 4th Wave of Feminism: An Analysis of Circles of Women in Poland," *Oñati Socio-Legal Series 10.1S* (2020): 119S. See also Chamberlain Prudence, "Affective Temporality: Towards a Fourth Wave," *Gender and Education* 28.3 (2016): 458–464; Stine Eckert and Linda Steiner, "Feminist Uses of Social Media: Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Pinterest, and Instagram," in *Defining Identity and the Changing Scope of Culture in the Digital Age*, ed. Alison Novak and Imaani Jamillah El-Burki (Hershey, Penn.: IGI Global, 2016), 210–230.

[53] Frank A. Johnson, *Dependency and Japanese Socialization: Psychoanalytic and Anthropological Investigations in Amae* (New York: NY University Press, 1992), 131.

[54] Ōhinata, "The Mystique," 207–208.

[55] See Motohashi, *Bosei no yokuaku to teikō*, 1.

[56] Yagi, *Diary of a Void*, 186–187.

[57] Ibid., 188–190.

[58] See Kenjiro Takahashi, Natsumi Nakai, Suguru Takizawa, Sawa Okabayashi, Yoshinobu Matsunaga, "Towards Equality: Paternity Leave Still a Tricky Issue in Japan's Staid Mindset," *The Asahi Shimbun*, June 28, 2021. https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14379538; Hiroko Tsujimoto, "Paternity Leave in Japan: No Time for Baby Steps: 'Work-Style' Reform Key to Reversing the Country's Low Birthrate," *Nikkei Asia*, November 14, 2020. https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Comment/Paternity-leave-in-Japan-No-time-for-baby-steps (Both accessed March 26, 2023).

[59] Yagi, *Diary of a Void*, 196–197.

[60] Cixous, "Coming to Writing," 7.

[61] Ōhinata, "The Mystique," 207.

[62] Yagi, *Diary of a Void*, 192–194.

[63] Cixous, "Coming to Writing," 7.

[64] Ezawa, *Single Mothers*, 67.

[65] Yagi, *Diary of a void*, 147.

[66] Ibid., 148–149.

[67] Ibid., 208.

[68] Seaman, *Writing Pregnancy*, 16.

[69] Yagi, *Diary of a Void*, 211.

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