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Generic Reconsiderations: But is it Japanese Literature?

Nina Cornyetz

A Preface on the State of the Field

Some time ago literary critic Terry Eagleton wrote: "The value-judgments by which [literature] is constituted are historically variable, [and] … these value-judgments themselves have a close relation to social ideologies. They refer in the end not simply to private taste, but to the assumptions by which certain social groups exercise and maintain power over others."[1] Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu nuanced the notion, reminding us to take seriously the role of economics as well as the "tastes" of those who control the means of production as well as the content of a literary field.[2] More recently, directly about Japanese modern literature, John Whittier Treat wrote: "The history of modern Japanese literature is coordinate with how the exercise of power—on behalf of the state and against it—was woven in ways both Japanese and generically modern."[3] In the pursuit of a meta-discourse of modern Japanese literature, some scholars have focused more on the role that the bookselling, publishing industries, and institutions have played in constructing a notion of a national literature than in analyzing the literary texts' content.[4] Others have contributed to this meta-discourse by focusing on issues around the transformation of language, time, and technologies. [5] These approaches counterbalance more conventional studies on narration, genre, and other intratextual and intertextual analyses.

As for Japanese literature, there is of course Japanese literature in English translation and Japanese literature in Japanese. (Of course there are other "Japanese literatures," such as those in French, or Korean, and etc.) The field in English was largely a product of the tastes of a handful of competent translators, the publishers, acquiring editors, and their judgment of what would sell to an English-language reader. The field in Japanese was, and still is, a product of the handful of literary award gatekeepers, writers, and critics, and journal and press acquiring editors,

who have, of course, changed over time, as have tastes and conceptions of what constitutes literature. In Japan there is a network of literary coteries called the *bundan* composed of established writers (who mentor young ones), publishers, and critics who overwhelmingly control access to publication.

This essay is about Japanese literature in English translation.[6] As Treat has argued, in spite of the need to situate modern Japanese literature in the context of both the general or generic experience of modernity and specific events germane to the nation-state Japan, there are still a surprising number of persistently Orientalist claims that insist on a transhistorical, and indeed, essentialist essence to (modern) Japanese literature. For example, Pico Iyer makes the spurious and even bizarre claim that "Japanese literature is often about nothing happening, because Japanese life is, too."[7] Writer Pavan Inguva writes in 2018,

> I have become quite partial to Japanese literature as a literary category. Most examples share overarching similarities in aesthetic flavour, such as the notion of impermanence of being, which derive from both cultural and religious developments throughout Japanese history. These sensitivities, observable in other Japanese art forms such as ceramics or paintings, result in a characteristically sublime writing style no matter when it was written.[8]

One wonders how such transhistorical assumptions about Japanese literature arose?

Regarding modern Japanese fiction, Edward Fowler notes that a series of translations into English in the 1950s and 60s, intended to transform the image of a bellicose Japan into an aestheticized retainer of ancient traditions, helped establish now outdated and even then extremely limited notions of what constituted "Japanese literature."[9] This corpus was primarily composed of texts by Kawabata Yasunari 川端康成 (1899–1972), Nobel Prize winner in 1968, Mishima Yukio 三島由紀夫(1925–1970), winner of multiple literary awards, finalist for the Nobel Prize, and Tanizaki Jun'ichirō 谷崎潤一郎 (1886–1965), winner of many literary awards, also a Nobel Prize finalist. Readers often found these texts vague, ambiguous, and delicate, as well as possessing a resounding exoticism putatively impenetrable by American sensibilities.[10] These texts and authors enjoyed a period of some limited popularity among American readers.

Paradoxically, the (relative) success of the 1950s and 60s introduction of this specific set of Japanese writers to English-language readers has in

fact worked against a broader understanding of what Japanese literature has to offer. Instead, Fowler argues, it engendered

> a self-perpetuating notion of Japanese fiction that continues to affect our view of Japan. In an age when media reports, scholarly research, and even gossip by acquaintances visiting Japan in ever-greater numbers should be providing an increasingly complex and diverse picture of Japan, we seem to be retaining the stereotypes that reemerged a generation and a half ago (in such works as *Homecoming* and *Some Prefer Nettles*) and even recycling them ourselves.[11]

Stephen Snyder notes that since translations are subordinate to the economic interests of the publishing industry, "these concerns shape a canon of literature in translation that may bear little resemblance to that in the source literature and culture, but that comes to play an important role in the way that culture or nation is perceived in the national imagination of the target culture."[12]

Today, while the relationship between economics, power, and ideology that collaborate in the evaluation and dissemination of literature in English from Japanese remains intact, some of the gatekeepers have changed and their numbers have proliferated. Moreover, the image of Japan being sold today is quite different. Recently there has been a relative upsurge in English language translations. Most of these texts, however, have little in common with the Orientalist notions delineated above. There is the phenomenon of Murakami Haruki, 村上春樹 (b.1949)who is hugely popular in non-Japanese readerships but regularly denigrated by the Japanese language gatekeepers for his putative lack of markers of Japaneseness as well as his globalized frames of reference for music, literature, films, and other samplings of world culture.[13] Snyder comments:

> His work succeeds In translation and finds a global audience exactly because it is intended for translation from the original place of its creation. … He creates fictions that are both translatable and embody translation in their themes and methods. His work moves between languages and cultures (and, perhaps particularly, into and out of English) with relative ease and fluidity, with few textual and stylistic impediments or difficult cultural contexts, but, rather, various mechanisms and textual markers that seem to invite and insist on translation as both theme and practice.[14]

As the antithesis to Murakami's putative translatability, Snyder poses

Mizumura Minae 水村美苗 (b. 1951), calling her texts "resistant to translation."[15] Snyder even claims that her *Shi shōsetsu* (*私小説, An I-Novel*, 1995) is virtually untranslatable. However, since then, it has indeed been translated in 2021 by veteran translator Juliet Winters Carpenter, under the title, *An I-Novel*. And this new translation follows upon three earlier texts by Mizumura, also translated by Carpenter.

Among the small minority of Americans who have read any Japanese fiction, those alive today are more likely to name Murakami over either of the Nobel prize winners (Kawabata and Ōe Kenzaburō 大江健三郎 (b. 1935)) unless they are older or scholars in the field.[16] There has also been a niche market interest in English language translations of Japanese detective fiction, evidenced by a simple search for the subject on Amazon, or the list of works by Edogawa Rampo 江戸川乱歩 (1894–1965) in English translations which rivals those by Kawabata, Mishima, or Tanizaki. (Although a vibrant and popular genre, notedly, in Japan, detective fiction is not considered "true" literature.) An occasional other translation may make the crossover as well, for example, *Konbini ningen コンビニ人間* （2016, *Convenience Store Woman*）, translated 2018 by Murata Sayaka 村田沙耶香 (b. 1979), the Akutagawa literary prize winner of 2016, translated by Ginny Tapley Takemori. These translations evidence the existence of a diverse range of Japanese fiction that bear little resemblance to the English-language translated canon as it has been taught in high schools and colleges, many of which indeed continue to favor the old masters, particularly those colleges with Asian studies majors and graduate programs.

The objective of this essay is precisely to counter such essentialist and dated assumptions about modern Japanese literature, by highlighting the actual breadth and diversity of English translations that negate these stereotypes. I even question postulating any homogeneous genre under the rubric "Japanese literature." I begin with a broad survey of English-language reviews by non-area-specialists of three contemporary texts of Japanese literature in translation *Honkaku Shōsetsu 本格小説* (*A True Novel,* 2002) by Mizumura, *Auto アウト* (*OUT*, 1997) by Kirino Natsuo 桐野 夏生 (b. 1951), and *GO (Go*, 2000) by Kaneshiro Kazuki 金城 一紀 (b. 1968). I originally chose these three simply because I happened to read all of them within a few months. However, while Mizumura is considered a writer of pure literature or *belles-lettres*, Kirino and Kaneshiro are not. This choice well illustrates my argument to follow, that questions how a certain genre came to dominate Japanese *belles-lettres*, and it is worth

noting here that Mizumura's title is Japanese and uses Chinese *kanji* characters, while Kirino's is in Japanese *katakana* phonetic syllabary for the English word "out," and Kaneshiro's title is in Roman letters. I follow my survey by revisiting and putting into question the dominant literary discourse by Japan specialists regarding just what constitutes "modernity" in Japanese literary studies. To temper this discourse, and to evidence the diversity of modern Japanese letters, I next narrow my focus to these three contemporary Japanese novels. My analysis will entail close narratological readings while acknowledging the power that literary coteries have had in forming a concept of modern Japanese literature. In the following order I will take up the complexities of each of the three novels' plots, narration strategies, focalization, issues of ethnicity and race, relation of the individual to social conflicts and issues, and degrees of fictionalization versus realism. Finally, I will show how these various aspects of each of the three can moreover be seen as complementary to some of the most highly regarded fictions of the *belles-lettres* traditions of Japanese modern literature and hence can belong in an alternative genealogy of modern Japanese literature.

Japanese Literature as World Literature

The three translated texts named above all found their way into the category of world literature. A survey of English language reviews by non-specialists in Japanese literature follows below, most of them online. In these reviews, one again finds the same mix of thoughtful commentary and Orientalist pablum. As these texts cross over into world literature and are incorporated into readings by non-Asian specialists in college and high school English departments, the tendency towards essentialist generalizations takes on a new life.[17] So-called world literature, as advocated by scholar David Damrosch, designates a specific sort of traveling text, that is read and circulated through modern forms of print technologies both in and well beyond the material site(s) of its original production.[18] Hence, it is as much a mode of circulation as it is of reading. For Franco Moretti this entails a kind of "distanced" read that goes against the grain of close readings as they are generally taught in high school and college courses, by focusing instead on the meta-histories of publication and dissemination practices and specificities.[19] The focus of many scholars writing about world literature has been the question of translation and the debate over exotic faithfulness to the original versus readability and relatability for the reader of the translation.[20] Undoubtedly, such exposure

works to broaden the reception of Japanese literature by American students and academics, but because it is often underwritten by Orientalist presumptions, ignorance of the language, and driven by economic forces, the result is double-edged.

J. Madison Davis comments on the categorization of Kirino's texts among non-Japanese mystery novels, and quotes Akihiro Miyata, the head of Kodansha's literary section, about the reason.

> Kirino's novels being shelved with the mysteries in New York bookstores was a way of differentiating them from the "Japanese sentimentality and Orientalism" that characterized earlier Japanese imports and that, by going more for "straightforward entertainment," Japanese authors were breaking into the international market.[21]

In other words, Kirino's texts are somewhat de-Japanized and categorized instead by genre. This is mirrored in some of the translator's choices, for example, in *Out* by rendering the leadership role of the character Masako's sobriquet, 師匠 (*shishō*) as "Skipper." *Shishō* or master, teacher, mentor, brings with it an Asian cultural tradition of learning through imitation and apprenticeship. Skipper avoids this association, instead suggesting a skilled ship captain. This is one way of shifting the text from a "window" on Japan's particularity to offering it a place within a native genre or corpus. Mizumura's *Honkaku Shōsetsu* undoubtedly also because she foregrounds issues of Japanese versus Western literature, is conversely read as representative of Japanese literature and hence disappointing or satisfying expectations of the same. Interestingly, *GO* is overwhelmingly *not* read as Japanese literature apparently because the protagonist is Korean. I postulate that it is because "Korean" signals practically nothing to the average young American reader (beyond K-Pop perhaps), the text appears to have been evaluated simply on its own terms, winning some accolades and some pans. Interestingly, most book reviews focus on the text as by an ethnic Korean, and take up the political question of *Zainichi* (Korean heritage Japanese resident) status rather than the book as fiction.[22]

For Mizumura, this crossover into world literature often results in strange claims as to what is Japanese about the text and what is derivative of the West and therefore inauthentic. Editor Ryu Spaeth's review of *Honkaku Shōsetsu* is a case in point:

> If the easygoing style of Haruki Murakami, Mizumura's wildly popular contemporary, goes down as easily as a bowl of instant noodles, her prose,

> particularly in the prologue, can carry the sour edge of pickled plums or the bitter whiff of fermented soy beans. The narrator can be fussy and pedantic. Her infrequent flashes of humor are of the grim variety. She also seems incapable of forgiving America for the crime of being, well, not her homeland, a common sentiment among emigrants. "The heap of red meat they served on an enormous platter to two small women was a clear reminder that I was back in America," she sniffs at one point. But once the book moves to Japan, where the story of two doomed lovers separated by class and race really begins, the prose is unflaggingly elegant, spare, and understated; in other words, it is in keeping with the exquisite refinement that characterizes much of Japanese art.[23]

I question: what exquisite refinement did Spaeth have in mind? Can he name a specific art form, artist, era, or genre of such "exquisite refinement"? Why is it that the prose itself is different in the descriptions of the two countries? Can he show this with examples? And, which narrator? Is it Minae? Although that is an educated guess, there is no attention to the nested narrations that present decidedly different personas as intradiegetic narrators. That there are no page numbers affixed to the quotes makes it very tedious to track down. The verb he employs to describe her reaction to the meat, "sniffs" possibly reads into a simple observation an intent of critique. Anyone who has lived in Japan for a period of time *would* be impressed (positively or negatively) by the quantity of meat to a serving.

Spaeth also notes, rather fussily and pedantically, that Mizumura has a strange "tic" of explaining things for the benefit of the English-language reader, and not necessary for her native Japanese audience, once again a question of translation choices. As proof of this, he quotes the English language translated text: "[S]he also responded to the year-end appeals for donations to charity by NHK, the national broadcasting service; and she regularly contributed to Doctors Without Borders."[24] He criticizes this one sentence (in an 800-plus page text!), pointing out that Japanese readers know what NHK is, but the author should have identified Doctors Without Borders for the ignorant Japanese reader, writing that Mizumura "got it backward."[25]

This quote not only does not identify who the "she" is, but is snarkily suggesting that Mizumura, in fact, anticipated an English-language version of her work (as does Murakami Haruki). He claims that the translator could not add such information without taking "great liberties."[26] I consulted the Japanese version and compared it with the

English translation. The "she" who is narrating is in fact not the Minae character, but another, Yōko as an adult, and indeed, the explanation "national broadcasting service" was added by the translator (which does not constitute great liberties, it denotes good translation). Furthermore, to assume that Doctors Without Borders is something only Westerners are aware of is breathtakingly provincial. Spaeth ends his review with another spurious claim as to the "message" of the text: "The Japanese writer, in other words, is not a mere interpreter, an inferior facsimile of the Western one. But she is defined by him, and he by her, locked as they are in an eternal struggle of contrasts. And that is a very Japanese concept indeed."[27] One wonders, what is it that he finds "very Japanese" about an "external struggle of contrasts"? He appears to find Japan only in how it is not the West, whatever that may denote to him. And note too, that he genders Japan feminine, as intertwined with the Western masculine, in an offensively Orientalist and sexist flourish.

In another review, Geoffrey Robert Waring complains that "Mizumura's determination to introduce British themes of class into a Japanese literary form can feel forced (indeed, class is everywhere, sometimes making the privileged characters feel cartoonish, like stock villains in a morality tale)."[28] Such a statement, by viewing class struggles as forced into a Japanese literary form denies the very real social class hierarchies that of course are central to Japanese modernity, and reinforces the Orientalist notion that Japanese literature must be about the individual in harmony with his/her environment, a false stereotype engendered by the myth of Japanese homogeneity. The class and ethnic inequities detailed in the novel are and were very real and are not imported, in any way, from the West. And, I do not concur that a single character in the text is cartoonish. Careful attention is paid throughout to providing ample socioeconomic context and psychological depth as a background to each main character's positioning.

What suffers most in this wasting of review space to ponder a translation choice or to make interpretations based not on the text but on some pre-existing concept of what is "very Japanese," is the lack of attention to what the novel *does* (and does so successfully), and that is weave an engrossing tale of star-crossed lovers, over generations of changing sexual, racial, ethnic mores and socio-politics. In fact, *Honkaku Shōsetsu* is a transposition of Emily Brönte's *Wuthering Heights* tale of star-crossed lovers from the Yorkshire moors to the resort town of Karuizawa. And a pondering of the limitations and liberties of Japanese

literature to boot.

One finds a different sort of unevenness in reviews of *Auto*. Stephen Poole takes a cautiously second-stringer position to comment that:

> *Out* is a strange novel indeed: slow, relentless, banal and gleefully grisly, to the point that it can rather strain credulity. I would like to call the sadomasochistic dénouement between Masako and Satake preposterous, but must bow to the privileged viewpoint of the author's sex.[29]

Whereas Katherine Cross offers a strong feminist reading, observing the psychological portrayals of not only the women but the men of the text as well:

> [Kirino] gives the reader eloquent tours of nearly every character's psyche and convincingly founds (sic) their motivations in the myriad distortions that both sexism and capitalism ruthlessly impose on people. Remarkably, she does this without sententious moralising, and though astute readers will see feminist analysis throughout the text, one never feels as if she's doing assigned reading in a Women's Studies class. Kirino's skill is in conveying the unpretentious, matter-of-fact obviousness of patriarchy.[30]

With *Auto*, the critics seem split by sex: men suffered affront, women applauded. Men saw something "Japanesey" while women found universalism. Jackson Bliss laments:

> The lack of redeemably complex male characters in *Out* is teeth-grinding, for sure, but is also directly related to the simplistic construction of Japanese masculinity in general in this novel and is largely a by-product of the narrative focus, which make all peripheral characters blurry and undeveloped save for the four main female characters.[31]

Cross's take on the male characters is surprisingly different, and more accurately represents the text, which "manages, for instance, the remarkable trick of making a man who sexually assaults one of the characters into a somewhat sympathetic figure, crushed beneath the weight of racism, the broken dreams of international migration, and his own childlike mentality."[32] In an otherwise well-measured review, Tom Ruffles muses that the gangster Satake's ambivalent feelings towards Masako and the woman he had previously murdered show how, "[l]ove and hate, the desire to obliterate and the desire for possession, are subtly intertwined. This feels a very Japanese form of pathology."[33] Katherine Cross

conversely finds:

> The story owns its Japanese setting but, unsurprisingly, eschews the accumulated detritus of stereotypes and Orientalist clichés about the country, instead giving us a clear picture that anyone in the West should be able to relate to. The gauze of exoticisation is ripped away and we have in its place a perspicacious terror that makes for both a convincing story and a stirring feminist analysis. And, dare I say it, an intersectional one at that. Class, race, and gender all weave their way into Kirino's bleak story. It's yet another reminder that we should, as ever, refuse to take those essentialist, cultural relativist bromides about unbridgeable differences between cultures seriously.[34]

In sum, the crossover of some Japanese literature into world literature and mainstream literary review undoubtedly broadens its reception and, of course, sales. There are thoughtful reviewers who are non-specialists. But there are also those who come pre-conditioned with a specific concept of Japan and its literature that unfortunately creeps into their reviews, and hence misinforms, and perpetuates misleading myths for the average reader of the crossing-over Japanese text.

This essay next turns to the specificities of discourses on the Japanese modern novel by scholars in Japan and abroad that have led, in part, to the Orientalist stereotypes described and quoted above, and subsequently to a close reading of the three translated texts against the grain of the assumptions that inhere in those characterizations.

Modernity comes to Japanese Literature

In the case of Japanese literature, as in Romance-language novels, an intratext-focused analysis broadly held by most scholars of Japanese literary history argues that a type of interiority marked the origins of modern literature, and included a shift towards realism in content.[35] Modern literature in Japan, according to such scholars, officially begins with Futabatei Shimei 二葉亭四迷, *Ukigumo 浮雲 (Drifting Cloud*, 1887), a story of a downtrodden everyday man in conflict with society, although literary critic Karatani Kōjin has made a convincing case for the precedence of Mori Ōgai 森鴎外, *Maihime* 舞姫（*The Dancing Girl*, 1890）.[36] Regardless, these scholars argue that in general, literature begins to embrace stories that could be real. These tales about regular folk, moreover, tell their tales in Japan for the first time without the intervention of a discernable narrator, be it an omniscient and distanced heterodiegetic

teller of the tale in which focalization shifts freely from character to character—more common to Romance language texts—or in narrow, internally focalized first- or third-person homodiegetic narrators, more common to modern Japan.[37] The narrator is now the central character in his own tale. These texts aim to relate a plausible story that makes individual human life and inner conflict the core of the narrative. As Tomiko Yoda puts it regarding Ōgai:

> the text highlights the solitude of the narrator, presenting his recounting of the past as a discursive act neither requested by nor explicitly intended for an external audience. This underscores the singularity of the subject, who posits himself, moved to write by internal causes. What motivates his writing on himself for himself is the painful remorse etched deeply in his mind, keeping him in a constant state of longing for the past. … The narrator of "The Dancing Girl" is a man trying to make sense of his life. He thereby reconstructs his past and objectifies himself in that world as the subject of biography.[38]

The attempt to write about truth and achieve realism in prose is said to have led to the dominance of a specific type of single-consciousness confessional narration (like in Ōgai's *Maihime*), characterized by the "I-novel" and understood as epitomized in 1907 with the publication of *Futon* *蒲団*（*The Quilt*) by Tayama Katai 田山花袋.[39]

Literary scholar Masao Miyoshi distinguishes the Japanese *shōsetsu* which he largely equates with the *shishōsetsu*, from the European novellas follows:

> The novel expresses the problematic of the individual in the contradiction between formal constraints and the ideological characterization of the individual as a free agent. The *shōsetsu* is the reverse. … Instead of man and author attempting to transform themselves into the third person, they aim at discarding— or at least concealing— the narrator. The man will speak and write directly. He will not wear a mask, but insists on the first person even to the extent of reporting aggressively his own daily routine (that excludes any formal and artistic invention) and presenting it as an emplotted event.[40]

It is also commonly affirmed that the *shishōsetsu*, a genre limited to a single narrating perspective in which the author is conflated with the narrator, who in turn is conflated with the protagonist, and in which states of mind and ordinary lives replace action and heroes/antiheros, was the

dominant twentieth-century literary genre in Japan. (This then would be Pico Iyer's literature where nothing happens.) Literary critic Shibata Shōichi distinguishes the genre from the Western novel, writing that the world depicted in the *shishōsetsu* is constitutively "fragmentary" and "small," while that of the "true novel" of Western origins was "large."[41] Because the *shishōsetsu*'s truth was confined to a single individual's experience and the mental processing of that experience, the worldview was extremely claustrophobic. The true novel, or *honkaku shōsetsu*, conversely, spread its perspective widely, to address sociocultural and economic realities beyond that of the individual, in an expansive perspective on the characters' lived worlds. As a result, in the *shishōsetsu*, fictionalization was necessarily marginalized and limited. Karatani explains:

> An aversion to "construction" or *kōsei* was to become a dominant trend embodied in the *shishōsetsu.* … the *shishōsetsu* form is fundamentally antagonistic to "construction," in such a manner that even nineteenth-century [European or Western] novels could appear "impure" or "vulgar." What is paradoxical is that in Japan this movement which was so contrary to "literature" should have come to constitute "pure literature" or *junbungaku.*[42]

The *shishōsetsu* came to dominate the modern Japanese concept of "pure literature," made possible by the power of the *bundan* literary coteries, or system of co-affirming values held by editors, publishers, established writers, and critics.[43] At the same time, regular readers (not the academic intelligentsia) were consuming entirely different sorts of popular, fantastical, and historical fictions.[44]

In short, for many scholars, modern Japanese literature, seen as dominated by the *shishōsetsu* genre, is said to be of limited scope, rejecting outright fictionalization, and exploring states of mind rather than telling tales about things that happen. It can then be said to appear vague, ambivalent, and fragmentary, with a certain melancholic aesthetic to it. However, and this is the crux of my argument, there are nonetheless, throughout the history of modern Japanese literature, many texts that were neither *shishōsetsu* nor of single-perspective focalization, and indeed are constructions in the sense that Karatani uses the term.

Treat's *The Rise and Fall of Modern Japanese Literature* offers an alternative history of the field, by dispensing with the search for the "modern self" that undergirds the conventional chronologies. Instead, he

takes up a set of texts, many ignored by the literary genealogy I have sketched out above, as early examples of modern literature, such as Natsume Sōseki 夏目漱石 *Wagahai wa neko de aru 吾輩は猫である* (*I am a Cat,* 1906), narrated, impossibly, by a cat, alongside contemporary examples of parodic literature far from conventional paradigms of modern Japanese literature – texts that are in fact filled with fiction and event, or construct. Treat opens his study with a chapter on *Torioi Omatsu kaijō shinwa 鳥追阿松海上新話,* (Tales of Omatsu) a literary miscellany(続き物) genre serialized in newspaper installments in 1877-1878, by Kubota Hikosaku 久保田彦作（1846-98). Akin to Benedict Anderson, Treat takes seriously the role of newspapers in creating a new sense of nationalism, and integral to the inauguration of a national literature.[45] "Omatsu," the serialized tale by Kubota, is the fantastical retelling of a complicated series of episodes in the life of its heroine, Omatsu, a *hinin* (non-human; member of the outcaste class), liberated from the status as a new commoner with the abolishment of the class in Meiji (1868-1912), and who can be categorized under the rubric of poison-woman, or murderess, one of many abiding tropes of dangerous women throughout the history of Japanese fiction.[46] The tale, purported to be based on the life of a "real" Omatsu, is also illustrative of the negotiations between so-called truth and fiction that Treat places at the heart of the origins of Japanese literary modernity.[47] Arguing that in fact the *shishōsetsu* is *not* the "representative form of modern Japanese literature," Treat points out that simultaneously:

> Popular fiction (*taishū bungaku*) … gained popularity along with the detective novel, the mystery novel, and literature of the occult and the fantastic. These are genres where there is little, if any, of the narrow perspective, plotless organization, and distrust of invention said to be typical of not only the I-novel but modern Japanese prose fiction in general.[48]

Treat draws our attention here to the fact that the stereotypes popularized among English-language readers of Japanese literature in the 1950s and 60s applied only to that narrow genre of prize-winning Japanese authors and texts valued by the *bundan* of the time.

The following sections of this essay will offer close readings of the two contemporary Japanese-language fictions named above: Mizumura's *Honkaku Shōsetsu*, winner of the 2002 Yomiuri Prize for Literature, and Kirino's *Auto,* winner of the Mystery Writers of Japan Award and nominee for the 2004 Edgar Allen Poe Award of the Mystery Writers of America. I

will argue that in the present state of the field of Japanese literature such axioms as "eventless, single-perspective, vague, harmonious, avoiding construct, not about the individual versus social constraints" become, in fact, ludicrous. I will also take up, in lesser detail, the translation of *Zainichi* Kaneshiro's *GO*, winner of the Naoki Prize, to argue that it challenges the notion of "Japanese literature" itself, while simultaneously hollowing out the melodrama that lies at the core of conventional *shishōsetsu*. The final section of this essay, in keeping with the spirit of Treat's alternative history of modern Japanese literature, will argue that the critical insistence on the dominance of the *shishōsetsu* ignores the plentiful examples of other narrating styles and genres by placing my three fictions in a literary genealogy of precedents that have been variously canonized by the field of Japanese literature at large, and which are largely available in English translations, and that, like Treat's alternative historical lineage, depart from the *shishōsetsu* model.

Complex Construct or Plot

Honkaku Shōsetsu weaves together three time periods and the chronicles of four families. The dramatis personae are the Saegusas, Shigemitsus, Azumas and Utagawas, and the Saegusa's maid, Tsuchiya Fumiko; an adopted son of laborers living on the Saegusa property, possibly of partly Chinese heritage, Azuma Tarō; and a fictionalized version of Mizumura Minae herself. It is the tale of the ultimately tragic and triangulated love affair between Azuma, Saegusa Yōko, and her husband Matsuki. It is also a metafiction exploring the split in Japan between writers and critics who advocated the *shishōsetsu* versus those preferring the *honkaku shōsetsu*. A map and photographs of the seaside resort town of Karuizawa, a location central to the story, add to the text's metafictional aspects.

Hannah Vose writes:

> The plot is triple-layered: the outside is the story of Yusuke Kato's brief interactions with the Saegusa family, Taro Azuma, and Fumiko Tsuchiya one summer week when he was vacationing with a friend. The next layer is Fumiko's retelling—to Yusuke—of the things she witnessed during her acquaintance with the Saegusa, Shigemitsu, Utagawa, and Azuma families. The innermost layer of the plot is the history of the Saegusa, Shigemitsu, and Utagawa families, as told by the Shigemitsu's maid to Fumiko when Fumiko was in the Utagawa family's service. Each layer of the plot is nested inside the other to create a fully expanded story, from before the beginning to after the end. Each of the narrators brings a part of the story

into being, although not necessarily in order.[49]

From this description, it is eminently clear that *Honkaku Shōsetsu* is complexly emplotted with a succession of narrators and retellings, none of which are characteristic of the absence of fictionality and single-consciousness of the standard *shishōsetsu*. Not only is the novel filled with events "that happen," (to name just a handful of events: Saegusa Shigemitsu, Yōko and her husband Shigematsu Matsuyuki, and other characters, die; Azuma emigrates to America and goes from rags to riches, returning to Japan after a fifteen-year absence; Fumiko marries, divorces, remarries, is widowed. She graduates from domestic servant to working as Azuma's assistant.)

Auto spans a mere five or so months, from July to early winter. It is the story of four working-class, mostly middle-aged, female *bentō* (弁当、box lunch) factory co-workers whose lives become interwoven when one of them, Yamamoto Yayoi, murders her husband Kenji and the others conspire with her to chop up the body to dispose of it. Katori Masako is the mastermind and chief executor of the body chopping and disposal, and main protagonist of the text. Azuma Yoshie is roped into the scheme by economic need; Jonouchi Kuniko is incorporated when she shows up unannounced while Yoshie and Masako are chopping up Kenji. The bags of chopped up body parts are divided to be discarded where garbage is not "kept track of" and far from Masako's house.[50] Predictably the careless Kuniko does not follow Masako's careful directions, and dumps her bags in a public park, where they are soon found. Ultimately this leads to the identification of the corpse, the murder of which the police first attribute to the blood-chilling gangster Mitsuyoshi Satake, who figures out who the real killer was once he is exonerated of the crime.

Unintentionally, the women's actions thus bring them into deadly conflict with Satake, who, falsely accused, has set out to get his revenge on the women, reserving his most heinous punishment for Masako. Satake metes out his punishment one by one to three of the four women, killing Kuniko and taking all the insurance money from Yayoi. Yoshie sets her own home on fire, killing her mother-in-law. Masako, who Satake has raped and beaten in a brutal scene, survives by killing him before he can kill her. The tale is narrated by a changing roster of characters, is filled with graphic depictions of violence, and takes place in the spatial and temporal margins of mainstream Japanese society. Far from being averse to construction, the text is filled with twists and turns, is fast moving,

graphic, even brutal in description.

GO is the story of Japanese resident Korean high schooler Sugihara, son of an ex-pro boxer, and his romance with a Japanese girl named Sakurai. Spanning about nine months, from April to Christmas Eve, there are ample flashbacks to fill in necessary backstories for the reader. The narrative present is replete with mundane events in Sugihara's life, punctuated by moments of extreme graphic violence. *GO* is written in *shishōsetsu* style, as the narrator-author-protagonist conflation is evident in its single perspective narration. However, *GO* is also filled with fast paced, changing events. Sugihara meets Sakurai, they embark on a relationship, his best friend Jeong-Il is beaten to death, Sakurai and he break up and make up.

All three plots thus depart radically from the Orientalist stereotypes and evidence a clear challenge to Iyer's claim that nothing happens in Japanese literature, and to the notion that the *shishōsetsu* model is the only paradigm available to modern Japanese fiction writers.[51]

Narration strategies: fiction or fact?

Honkaku Shōsetsu, Mizumura explains in a long metafictional digression, takes its title from the debate in Japan over ideal literature. This digression begins on page 158 (of an 854 page-long text) in the translated version, when the narrator interrupts the story of Azuma (the main story of the novel) to explain that she was told the Azuma story by someone else, named Yusuke. In addition, she notes that for her, it recalled "a literary classic set on the wild Yorkshire moors and written more than a hundred and fifty years ago by the Englishwoman E.B."[52] Critic Caroline Bleeke summarizes: "Mizumura reimagines Emily Brontë's novel [*Wuthering Heights*] in postwar Japan, weaving a two-volume tapestry of class upheaval, immigrant striving, and forbidden love. In so doing Mizumura interrogates the dichotomies of romanticism and postmodernism, East and West, creation and appropriation. The result is at once literary homage and departure."[53] *Honkaku Shōsetsu* not only tells a fascinating story about romance, class, ethnicity, economics, and social mores over a changing Japanese and American spatial backdrop, but also constitutes a sort of metafictional commentary on literature itself in part because it blurs the generic lines between the *shishōsetsu* and the *honkaku shōsetsu*.

The narrator's digression on the genres continues:

> In an "I-novel," [*shishōsetsu*] readers expect the writer to figure in the work in one way or another. Whether the work is in fact based on the writer's life

> or is a contrivance is ultimately irrelevant. The author-protagonist of an "I-novel" is perceived as an actual, specific individual, one whose face may be publicly known in other media. The work is necessarily assumed to be truthful about that individual's life. Moreover, readers tend to favor works that have no beginning, or ending, and are fragmentary, finding them true to life, as life also has no opening or closure as such and is nothing but an accumulation of fragmentary experiences. In other words, what readers look for in this genre is the absence of the authorial will – of the intention to create, through words, an independent universe.[54]

By including this "aside" by the Minae character who appears in the text, the conventions of the *honkaku shōsetsu* versus those of the *shishōsetsu* are posed as issues within the text itself, and not only outside the text; that is, she brings the debate into the novel itself.

Following Brontë, Mizumura employs a nesting narrative strategy of voice within voice (within voice) to relate the lengthy saga of tragic love, ethnic bigotry, and shifting socio-economic fortunes. Mizumura begins the text in a first-person narration of when she was in high school in the States and first met Azuma, who was working for her father's friend. Other characters address this narrator directly as "Minae" and her parents as "Mr. and Mrs. Mizumura."[55] (Thus mimicking the *shishōsetsu.*) Subsequently, the tale moves years forward to the time when the character Minae is a professor of Japanese literature teaching at Stanford, and Yusuke seeks her out to tell her his story. His tale, which he tells her over the course of one long night, is populated by the stories of other narrators. (Thus, resembling a *honkaku shōsetsu.*) The span of reported events and family histories is epic and filled with backward analepses, as Fumiko warns Yusuke, "'I'm afraid there'll be a lot of digressions.'" [56] Fumiko relates not only her family history, but also that of the Saegusas, Shigematsus, and Azumas to Yusuke.

The framing narrator, Minae, notes that she begins to feel as though she were dreaming as she listens, that it was "a story just like a novel…. I listened with the stillness of deep sleep. The present disappeared. The place where we were disappeared. Even Yusuke and I disappeared. With my sense of the solid reality around us dissolving, the yellowish glow from the small bulbs on the walls looked like will-o'-the wisps, ghost fires."[57] Shibata comments:

> The existence of the narrator Yusuke and that of the listener, "I" disappear, and accordingly, "reality completely evaporates" and what comes to the surface, so to speak, is a world of illusion which oscillates in the liminal,

> permeable boundary between fiction and truth. And so, the presence (*sonzai*) of a narrator becomes unnecessary, meaning simply that, solely by the function of the so-called "narration," the world of the story that is told is indeed a "novelistic story," namely, the world of the so-called "true novel."[58]

The experience of the absorbed reader is thus superimposed on the immersion of the narrating "I" by the details of the narrated tale. The narrations have a ring of veracity, in part attributable to the framing of the story of Azuma and Yōko within a *shishōsetsu*-type framework embodied by the character Minae and because the conversations between characters are reported as if verbatim.

However, many of the most significant events that drive the story forward are in fact suppositions, not observations, on the part of narrators. As Shibata points out, most of the story is narrated by Yusuke, who tells Minae what he heard from Fumiko. Fumiko herself had no first-hand knowledge of much of what she reports, such as, for example, of course, events that happened before she was born in 1937, Yōko's depression and disappointment when Azuma spends seven years abroad without contacting her, or the details of the triangulated relationship between Azuma, Yōko, and Matsuki upon Azuma's return to Japan. In fact, Shibata quotes Fumiko in the text, who admits to having imagined events at will (*katte ni sōzō shite*) and filled in the blanks.[59] Critic Kawasaki Akiko observes that all the narrators are "outside" their narrated stories.

> What we should pay particular attention to here is how the two narrations by Fumiko and Yusuke both in the same way, as does Minae's, which sits at the farthest distance from the story itself, participate in a relationship that mutually constructs and recirculates a sense of real time and veracity, and also how simultaneously the tradition of the *shishōsetsu* is introduced.[60]

The suppositions by the narrators comprise a set of informed assumptions on the part of the storytellers. For Kawasaki, the text thus acts as the site to employ a Japanese language text for the dissemination of the Western novel conventions. She writes: "Through making the novelist Minae resemble the novelist Mizumura, one can say that *A True Novel* is a *honkaku shōsetsu* encapsulated by a *shishōsetsu*, or that it is a *shishōsetsu* framed by a *honkaku shōsetsu.*"[61] Notedly, Kawasaki finds that the genres inhabit one another, rather than one enfolding another.

Near the text's conclusion, we are given a new tidbit that suggests that

some, if not all of our narrators, are in fact not wholly reliable, in a rather catty revelation by Saegusa Fuyue that Azuma and Fumiko had been lovers during the half year that they lived together after Azuma and Yōko separate, and before he goes to America for an extended absence.[62] Shibata notes that since Fumiko has given no suggestion of such a relationship to the reader or to Yusuke, this revelation renders the very credibility of the tale in jeopardy.[63]

Auto is decidedly not the story of the author, Kirino, who studied law in college.[64] Kirino reports:

> There was a *barabara* [*jiken*; mutilation murder] incident in Inokashira Park, not far from where I was working, and the case interested me. The victim's wife was initially suspected, and that definitely provided me with ideas for *OUT*.
> When the idea for a housewife committing a mutilation murder began to take shape, I researched the history of such crimes in Japan, and was fascinated to learn it's fairly common for women to be involved. It's a simple physical fact that a corpse is heavy, and this makes it hard to carry. So, it would make sense for a woman to enlist the help of her friends.[65]

Auto is also not told by a single narrator in the *shishōsetsu* style. Instead, the alternating narrators of the text speak in third person, and report from each of the perspectives of the five main characters (the four women and Satake) as well as from several additional focalizers. The novel moves swiftly through time, introducing us to each main character by shifting internal focalization, so that by page fifty we have "met" and heard the thoughts of each of them. The shifts in focalization are signaled by numbered subchapters within titled chapters. In the first subchapter that is focalized through Yayoi she kills Kenji, testament to the fast pace of the text. There is also a narrator of the text, interpolated as the implied author. Subchapters are primarily focalized through each narrator in turn. Chapter one, "Night Shift" includes subchapter 2, focalized through Kinuko, who subjects herself to a cringeworthy self-assessment:

> The real point, she thought, is that I'm ugly. Ugly and fat. Peering into the rearview mirror, she felt that wave of hopelessness which always swept over her. Her face was broad and jowly, but the eyes that peered back at her were tiny. Her nose was wide and sloping, but her mouth was small and pouty. Everything's mismatched, she thought.[66]

But the narrator is no less precise and evaluative, and as an external

focalizer, knows more than the character(s) of any particular scene. For example, when Masako discards Kenji's key into a drainage ditch, the narrator notes that she "never noticed Kazuo Miyamori, crouched next to the rusty shutter."[67] While this is not exactly commensurate with the omniscient narrator commonly associated with a paradigmatic *honkaku shōsetsu*, together with the shifting narratorial focalization, it is radically different from the single perspective of the *shishōsetsu*.

GO most resembles the *shishōsetsu* in the conflation of narrator and protagonist and author. It is a single-consciousness narration and generally reports on the daily routine of the narrator-protagonist. *GO* thus uses a *shishōsetsu* to tell the "real" tale of being *Zainichi*, which creates a paradox from the point of being Japanese. For many in the Japanese *bundan* and elsewhere, the specificity of Korean resident ethnic identity precludes Japaneseness, just as in the United States, non-white residents' identities today tend to be hybridized, such as African American or Asian American. Moreover, the themes of the text mirror the status of the author-narrator; what does it mean to be a Korean resident in Japan? Which Korea does an individual in Japan "belong" to? What exactly is ethnic and racial identity, from a biological and scientific and genetic perspective? By so doing it stretches the imagined selfsame national identity expected from a *shishōsetsu.*[68] By telling the story of a *Zainichi* Korean, the very meaning of "Japanese novel" is divested of its authenticity (truth) from within. That is, if a Japanese novel is defined by the racial "purity" of a biological and ethnic Japanese identity, how does one deal with a *shishōsetsu* novel in Japanese by a native Korean? And this issue of identity itself is what *GO* is about, hence there is also a metafictional element to this text as well.

I have noted the violence endemic to the text. In a scene where his father beats him up: "I took three punches to the face. Boom. Boom. Boom. The first punch hit me like a hunk of concrete and made my spine creak. I felt the second punch break one of my front teeth. I locked my guard in front of my face. I took a heavy punch in the ribs, right and left."[69] Curiously, the extreme violence depicted between father and son, and son and classmates, the protagonist's sexual awakening, daily routines, and family relations are all equally scrubbed of affect. The narrative present opens in Chapter 2, in which Sugihara beats up a fellow student: "I swung and smashed the ashtray against the bulge of his left brow – the supraorbital ridge, to be precise—with a little topspin. The skin there was thin and easy to cut. *Gshhh!* Right on the sweet spot."[70]

Rather than a confession filled with self-remorse, typical of the

shishōsetsu quest for confession (in essence nothing is confessed in *GO*), the melancholy core of a remorseful journey of self-revelation expected of the genre is in effect "hollowed out" from the inside. In the *shishōsetsu*, feelings, in particular shameful feelings, are exhibited voyeuristically. Sugihara, however, exhibits no shame.

The Individual and the Social

In *Honkaku Shōsetsu,* central to what Roland Barthes has called hermeneutic codes, or the setting-up of enigmas that suggests the further need for explication, are questions about Azuma, who never gets a turn at narration. Born poor but in the end wealthy—Azuma's origins, his activities and whereabouts during a missing period, the relations between him and Yōko, and between him and Fumiko are all questionable. The text is a densely constructed fictional world filled with diverse, round characters whose lives intersect. It paints a complex and realistic picture of the sociohistorical contexts of that fiction, detailing the abuse suffered by Azuma for illegitimate birth and racial hybridity, as well as Fumiko's childhood poverty.

A social problematic lies at the core of the tragic love story: Azuma is unacceptable as Yōko's husband because he is not purely Japanese and comes from a laboring class of rickshaw drivers. We hear that he is dark of complexion, and Minae reports "we began hearing peculiar rumors about him: that he wasn't Japanese, he was Chinese; no, Korean; no, he'd got Vietnamese blood in him…"[71] These rumors are repeated in the varied stories told. We never know whether they are true. But these rumors combined with his poverty are why he is bullied at school, beaten at home, and rejected as Yōko's husband. Azuma's shifting fortunes, and those of the Saegusa and Shigemitsu families, as well as Fumiko's own constitute the stories told in *Honkaku Shōsetsu.* Thus, Kawasaki claims the text to be a hybrid of not only the *shishōsetsu* and the *honkaku shōsetsu*, but the bildungsroman too:

> Time in *A True Novel* is the sort of time in a bildungsroman. This is because the two central characters, Tarō [Azuma] and Fumiko, each effectuate change over the passage of time. Moreover, as this change occurs together with a changing world … this can be called a … [historical type of] bildungsroman.[72]

Indeed, Azuma and Fumiko, Yōko and her husband and Azuma – who apparently enjoy a (scandalous) triangular love affair for a period of

time—all epitomize the exploration of individual free will against social constraints, in marked contrast to Miyoshi's assertion, quoted earlier, that the Japanese novel does the opposite.

Auto also addresses the individual versus social constraints, focused on the specific unhappiness and alienation suffered by all four female protagonists *because they are women*. As is *Honkaku Shōsetsu,* the text is deeply emplotted, and delves into class and ethnicity, economics and social mores. Raechel Dumas elaborates on the tropes of labor and consumption that function both literally and figuratively in the text, exploring,

> the problem of subjectivity by presenting the "home" (both literally and in the broader societal sense) as a "not-home"—that is, as a site in which the novel's principal characters are inscribed with meaning by external forces while being denied the agency to fully explore the possibilities of self.[73]

The novel depicts failures of romantic love and the dashed expectations of families. Even before the murder-cover up, for each of the four main female characters, life is a struggle. These women are on the margins of society, ignored and left behind by the contemporary economic and familial traditions of Japan.[74] Without youth, beauty, or wealthy husbands, the women live on the edge of affluent Japanese society, struggling to make ends meet. Working nightshifts at the box-lunch factory, the women form a friendship of sorts, although it is fragile, threatened by mutual resentments and jealousies.

Seaman notes that Masako lives in a tract house in the Western periphery of Tokyo, Yoshie in a run-down residential section of the city, and the factory where the women work is "surrounded by abandoned warehouses on the outskirts of a Tokyo suburb." [75] This spatial marginalization mirrors "the social marginalization of the novel's main characters, each of whom has been excluded from the urban 'centers' of power, wealth, and influence by the attitudes, actions, or absence of men."[76] Moreover, as Seaman points out, the novel depicts not only the women but also others living on the margins including "immigrants from Brazil, social misfits, unskilled laborers."[77] Dumas concurs, *Auto* "calls attention to a number of largely invisible cultural conditions, frequently via the voices of characters representing social groups who have been historically relegated to the margins of public discourse."[78] Towards the end of the text, when Masako is in desperate need of help of safeguarding her money, which she will need to (finally) escape her predicament, she

turns to Kazuo, paradoxically a Brazilian co-worker who tried to rape her in the beginning of the text, but with whom she has built a sort of friendship.

Regarding the brutal rape by Satake just before the novel ends on a somewhat hopeful note, with Masako headed towards the airport and freedom, Dumas argues that the "violent conclusion functions as a metaphor for the sexual politics of capitalism, and thus engages with the issue of female agency in a manner that transcends the ostensibly 'private' realm and enters into an interrogation of the gender politics that inform the socio-economic topography of contemporary Japan." [79] The socioeconomic realities of being a poor woman in contemporary Japan, and the detailing of literal and material dangers to which women in Japan may be subjected to marks *Auto* as a powerful commentary on gendered politics. The women are in marked social conflict with the society in which they live.[80]

GO, by telling the tale of the discrimination suffered by *Zainichi* residents, is a story chiefly about the individual and the struggle with social constraints – I don't think I need to belabor the point here. The second paragraph reads: "My father was fifty-four and held North Korean citizenship. He was what the Japanese call *Zainichi Chosenjin* and a Marxist."[81] On page nine, we get: "The great Bruce Springsteen— he sings about the struggles of the working class. I'm *Zainichi*. I've got my own struggles to sing about." When, on the verge of consummating their love affair with sex for the first time, Sugihara tells Sakurai of his Korean ethnicity, she informs him that her father has forbade her to engage with a Korean or Chinese boy because they have "tainted blood."[82] She dumps him. They reconcile about a month later, on Christmas Eve, and the novel ends.

Hence, in clear contradiction to Miyoshi's characterization of Japanese fiction as diametrically oppositional to the Western novel's depiction of the individual floundering between freedom and social constraints, each of these three novels narrate precisely such a conflict.

Literary Heritage

In spite of the stereotypes of Japanese modern fiction as vague, ambiguous, melancholically aesthetic, having a singular internal focalization, and limited in construct, the divergent narration strategies, their fictional construction, manner in which truth and fiction interweave, complex narrative focalizations, and violence of each of the three contemporary

fictions discussed in this essay can, perhaps surprisingly, be easily placed in a literary genealogy with antecedent texts composed of major works and authors of the Japanese canon. Mizumura's *Honkaku Shōsetsu* has *Wuthering Heights*—another fiction—as its backstory, but reality is invoked by character Minae and the story presented "as true." Kirino has the historical murder of husbands by their wives as her real backstory, but the novel itself is entirely construction. Both novels thus oscillate between telling a true story and a construct. Fact and fiction intertwine, sometimes in confusing parallels. Snyder elaborates the difficulties even the title, *Honkaku Shōsetsu,* presents to the English translator:

> The title, for example, was rendered as *A True Novel* in the English translation, no doubt for the ambiguous and possibly oxymoronic contention that a fiction or novel could also be "true." But *honkaku* has a wide range of meanings in Japanese, and the book could plausibly be called *A Genuine Novel* or *An Orthodox Novel* (as the phrase has generally been rendered, meaning, to Japanese readers and critics, a fully realized novel with an ambitious, complex plot). Other possible titles with different nuances would include *A Real Novel*, *A Serious Novel*, or even *A Standard Novel* or *A Full-Fledged Novel.*[83]

Honkaku shōsetsu is an oxymoron. If a novel is "realistic," it is also a fiction. Similar questions were raised by Nakagami Kenji 中上健次 (1946-1992), winner of the Akutagawa (1976), Mainichi and Geijutsu (1977) literary awards, in his *Kishū ki no kuni, ne no kuni monogatari　紀州木の国・根の国物語* (Ki Province: the tale of the land of trees and the land of roots, 1977-78) and who has (ironically) been dubbed "Japan's last novelist."[84] *Kishū* has been called a "travelogue" and vacillates between the genres of literature and ethnography. Nakagami traveled the provinces of Kishū and wrote down tales he was told by the inhabitants of the outcaste communities there. The first local informant for Kishū is Grandma-san, whose story "had a flavor like that of a solid, trustworthily written realistic novel."[85] This is the same problematic that Mizumura presents to the reader in her title and her discussion of Japanese literary genres, as well as the interweaving of *shishōsetsu* and *honkaku shōsetsu* narrating strategies.

Mizumura's use of her own doppelgänger as the primary narrator bears resemblance to the same in a text by Japan's most lauded modern female writer, Enchi Fumiko 円地文子(1905-1986) in her *Namamiko monogatari なまみこ物語*（*A Tale of False Fortunes*, 1965). Enchi was

awarded the Women's (1954 and 1966), Noma (1957), and Tanizaki (1969) literary prizes, receiving the title of Person of Cultural Merit (1979) and awarded the Order of Culture (1985). In *Namamiko monogatari* the primary narrator is a writer named Enchi Fumiko. Mizumura's incorporation of her own name for a character also reminded me of many texts by the writer Shimada Masahiko 島田雅彦（b. 1961), winner of the Noma Literary New Face (1984), Izumi Kyōka (1992), Itō Sei (2006), and the Mainichi Publishing Culture (2016) prizes. Shimada has used narrators within narrators that collapse a textual Shimada within other Shimadas in a parody of the *shishōsetsu*, while telling deeply constructed *fictions* of all sorts. In *Yume tsukai 夢使い* (*Dream Messenger*, 1989), for example, protagonist Machū recounts meeting "one writer named Shimada Masahiko, who is seriously thinking he would like to make me the protagonist of his next narrative. He'll come to get background material soon. I left him with the pointed remark that model fees are expensive."[86]

In some of these, moreover, Shimada is satirizing the icon of Japanese literature, Mishima Yukio for *his* variant textual personas.[87]

> By conflating Shimada-the-author (as referent), with an author-Shimada (as signifier) who appears in his fiction, and with other characters who are thinly veiled, partial representations of himself, and in his other performative venues, he generates a thick web of variant fictional and putatively non-fictional subjectivities."[88]

As do Shimada's diverse doppelgängers, Mishima's confound the readers' attempt to root out any "real" representation from their fictional ones.

The narration style of *Auto*, which is focalized through a changing roster of characters under the organization of the primary narrator, is quite common to modern Japanese literature, and can be seen in Enchi's text *Onnamen 女面* (Masks, 1958), in diary form in Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's *Kagi 鍵 (The Key, 1985)*, in the atomic bombing spokeswoman Hayashi Kyōko 林京子 (1930–2017; winner of multiple literary prizes) "Futari no bohyō" "二人の墓標" (Two Grave Markers, 1975), and countless other texts, going as far back even as the most lauded text of the premodern Japanese canon, Murasaki Shikibu 紫式部 *Genji monogatari 源氏物語* (*The Tale of Genji,* c. 1010). [89]

The nested narrations of *Honkaku Shōsetsu* also can be linked to those in texts by Izumi Kyōka 泉鏡花（1873–1939) a canonized writer about whom Tanizaki once wrote, "[Kyōka's] world is, simply, Japanese. … His

work is a pure Japanese product," while Mishima dubbed him a master of the feminine Dionysian half of Japanese literature.[90] The importance of each of these writers to the canon is attested to as one of Japan's literary awards is in Kyōka's name, one in Mishima's and one in Tanizaki's. Kyōka frequently has a primary framing narrator, easily conflated with the author, telling a tale that he has "heard" from others, and in which the narrations appear in quotation marks from characters within stories within stories. *In Yōken kibun* 妖剣記聞 (*The Tale of the Enchanted Sword,* 1920), for example, the narrator tells us: "Recently I heard this story…. A ghost will make a brief appearance in my tale, but please, do not say, what, again?"[91] The admonition to the reader is short-hand, since Kyōka was famous for his fondness for ghost stories. Hence, this narration style is well within one modern Japanese literary tradition, while it jettisons any resemblance to the *shishōsetsu*. Moreover, in spite of the putative rejection of things irrational in the properly modern novel, as do many fictions by Kyōka, *Honkaku Shōsetsu* incorporates a brush with the supernatural. The secondary narrator, Yusuke encounters what is later explained as the ghost of Yōko who appears when he spends the night at Azuma's residence.[92]

Conversely, Kirino is often grouped with the vibrant genre of Japanese detective fiction including the gruesome, campy narratives by pioneer Edogawa Rampo, whose tales are full of deviant sexualities and impossible plot turns. *Auto* is not a detective tale, but the criminal-woman trope can be placed in a long history of evil women reaching back to "Tales of Omatsu" and earlier, with countless examples from premodern Japanese literature.[93] Kirino's texts, including *Auto*, depict strangely deviant sexualities commensurate with Rampo's.[94] Her portrayals of a women's community inspired by the cruelty of the men and the patriarchal system also recalls Enchi's female communities.[95]

I could liken *GO* to any number of texts by Nakagami, the first Japanese writer to explicitly identify as a member of the *buraku* outcaste class, because of the endemic violence and subjective positioning outside mainstream Japaneseness, as well at the shared trope of tainted blood using an apparent *shishōsetsu* style narrative.[96] *GO* might, however, also be placed in a non-*shishōsetsu* lineage with Murakami Haruki's texts, many of which are likewise told in first-person or third-person limited perspective narration, because of the global cultural references, a narrator who does not really *seem to feel* much of anything (even when he claims he does), and is decidedly adolescent. When Sugihara first meets Sakurai, he says:

> A lone girl walked through it [the door]. From where I sat, I could only see her from the waist up. Her hair was short, like Jean Seberg's in *Breathless.* I loved Jean Seberg in *Breathless.* Her eyes were round and lovely even from a distance, brimming with the same kind of intelligence as Winona Ryder in *The Age of Innocence.* I loved Winona Ryder in *The Age of Innocence.*[97]

In its emotive flatness and litany of consumer goods, *GO* can also be likened to *Nantonaku, kurisutaru* なんとなく、クリスタル（*Somehow, Crystal,* 1980）by Tanaka Yasuo 田中康夫. In the love-affair narrated with little affect, I could even link Kaneshiro with Kawabata, about whom literary critic Matsuura Hisaki wrote, "When Kawabata Yasunari gazes intently at human beings it is the same gaze with which he gazes intently at antique curios."[98] From *GO*: "Dressed in a purple jacket and white skinny jeans with a pair of beige hiking boots, she breezed down the office-lined street. Wearing a black jacket, white T-shirt, regular jeans and loafers, I silently trailed after her."[99]

What I am pointing out is that the characterizations that gave us putative definitions of repeating attributes of "Japanese Literature" are, as Edward Said pointed out, like Orientalism itself, only possible through a thoroughly subjective discourse about Japanese literature indebted to an already existing structuring structure that seeks, consciously or unconsciously, to distinguish Japan from the so-called West, and within that primary division, other Eastern national literatures as well. One could, as evidenced by my very short study presented here, easily find a way of describing Japanese literature as: deeply emplotted, filled with round characters and nested narrations, diversely focalized with multiple narrators, violent, complexly constructed, depicting heterogeneous ethnicities, and open to a kind of magical-realism.

NOTES

[1] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 16.

[2] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed," in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. by Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 29–73.

[3] John Whittier Treat, *The Rise and Fall of Modern Japanese Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 21.

[4] Edward Mack, *Manufacturing Modern Japanese Literature: Publishing, Prizes and the Ascription of Literary Value* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010).

[5] Seth Jacobowitz, *Writing Technology in Meiji Japan: A Media History of Modern Japanese Literature and Visual Culture* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Ueda Atsuko. *Concealment of Politics, Politics of Concealment: The Production of "Literature" in Meiji Japan* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2007); Stefan Tanaka, *New Times in Meiji Japan* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

[6] Accordingly, all references to, quotations from, and pagination of the three translations discussed in detail herein are from the English translations unless otherwise specified. However, I maintain Japanese word order in the names of characters and authors, for consistency with references to other Japanese language sources. All translations from other literary texts as well as from secondary sources in Japanese referenced here are mine unless otherwise noted.

[7] Pico Iyer, Introduction to Natsume Sōseki, *The Gate,* translated by William F. Sibley (New York: New York Review of Books, 2013), vii.

[8] Pavan Inguva, "Japanese Literature Through the Ages," March 16, 2018, http://felixonline.co.uk/articles/2018-03-16-japanese-literature-through-the-ages/. Accessed August 7, 2023.

[9] Edward Fowler, "Rendering Words, Traversing Cultures: On the Art and Politics of Translating Modern Japanese Fiction," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 18.1 (Winter 1992): 1–44.

[10] Ibid., 4.

[11] Ibid., 10. The author of *Homecoming* (*Kikyō,* 1949; translated by Brewster Horwitz), is Osaragi Jirō, and *Some Prefer Nettles* (*Tade kuu mushi*, 1929; translated by Edward G. Seidensticker), is Tanizaki Jun'ichirō.

[12] Stephen Snyder, "Insistence and Resistance: Murakami and Mizumura in Translation," *New England Review* 37.4 (2016): 133.

[13] Hirata Hosea, "Amerika de yomareru Murakami Haruki,"アメリカでよまれる村上春樹 *Kokubungaku: kaishaku to kyōzai no kenkyū 國文学 解釈と教材の研究*40.4 (1995): 100–104; Matthew Richard Chozick, "De-exoticizing Haruki Murakami's Reception," *Comparative Literature Studies* 45.1, East-West Issue (2008): 62; Yoshio Iwamoto, "A Voice from Postmodern Japan," *World Literature Today* 67. 2 (Spring 1993): 299.

[14] Snyder, "Insistence and Resistance," 137, 138.

[15] Ibid., 139.

[16] Hirata, "Amerika de yomareru."

[17] For example, at New York University the English Department offers a course, "Modern Chinese Fiction," Barnard's English Department has "World Literature Revisited," and "The Global Novel." One can find similar course offerings in most colleges. There is a reader from SEA (Secular Eclectic Academic) "High School Literature Unit: Supernatural Japanese Literature." While I did not find a comprehensive list of such courses, a Google search at various high schools will support this statement.

[18] David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 4–5.

[19] Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (New York: Verso, 2013).

[20] Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Lawrence Venuti, *Translation Changes Everything: Theory and Practice* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013).

[21] J. Madison Davis, "Unimaginable Things: The Feminist Noir of Natsuo Kirino," *World Literature Today* 84.1 (Jan. to Feb. 2010): 11.

[22] See for example, John Lie, "Zainichi Recognitions: Japan Resident Korean's Identity and their Discontents," *Asia-Pacific Journal, Japan Focus* 6.11 (Nov. 1 2008): 1–12.

[23] Ryu Spaeth, "Against the West: On Minae Mizumura's A True Novel." *Full Stop*. Reviews Editors: Jesse Miller, Caren Beilin, Eleanor Gold, Allison N. Conner, October 14, 2014, https://www.full-stop.net/2014/10/14/blog/ryu-spaeth/against-the-west-on-minae-mizumuras-a-true-novel/. Accessed July 27, 2019.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Geoffrey Robert Waring, "Mizumura's Intelligent Novel," *The Mantle*. Review. 2/6/15: URL is not available. Accessed July 27, 2019.

[29] Stephen Poole, "Murder Sushi Wrote." *The Guardian*, November 26, 2004, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/nov/27/featuresreviews.guardianreview18. Accessed July 27, 2019.

[30] Katherine Cross, "Feministing Readz: Getting Inside Patriarchy's Head with Natsuo Kirino's *OUT*," *Feministing*. Senior Eds. Dana Bolger and Juliana

Britto Schwartz, August 26, 2914, https://feministing.com/2014/08/26/feministing-readz-getting-inside-patriarchys-head-with-natsuo-kirinos-out/. Accessed July 27, 2019. Site is currently down.

[31] Jackson Bliss, "The Psychopathic Gaze: Murder, Violence, and Misogyny in Natsuo Kirino's *OUT*," *Ploughshares at Emerson College* (blog), June 7, 2019, https://pshares.org/blog/the-psychopathic-gaze-murder-violence-and-misogyny-in-natsuos-kirinos-out/. Accessed July 24, 2019.

[32] Cross, "Feministing Readz."

[33] Tom Ruffles, "Out, by Natsuo Kirino," *The Joy of Mere Words: Book Notes by Tom Ruffles, Wordpress* (blog), April 1, 2016, https://tomruffles.wordpress.com/2016/04/01/out-by-natsuo-kirino/. Accessed: July 27, 2019.

[34] Cross, "Feminsting Readz."

[35] See, for example, Tomiko Yoda, "First-Person Narration and Citizen-Subject: The Modernity of Ōgai's The Dancing Girl,'" *The Journal of Asian Studies* 65.2 (May, 2006): 277–306; Karatani Kōjin, *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993); Edward Fowler, *The Rhetoric of Confession*: *Shishōsetsu in Early Twentieth-Century Japanese Fiction* (L.A. and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Miyoshi Masao, "Against the Native Grain: The Japanese Novel and the Postmodern West," in *Postmodernism and Japan*, edited by Masao Miyoshi and Harry Harootunian (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 1989), 143–68.

[36] Karatani Kōjin, *Origins.* Tellingly, the English translation of Futabatei's *Ukigumo* 浮雲 by Ryan is titled *Japan's First Modern Novel: "Ukigumo" of Futabatei Shimei.* Yoda examines how this modernity is linked to Ōgai's use of (two different) first person narrating strategies: *yo* and *ware/waga* in her "First-Person Narration and Citizen-Subject."

[37] In part this is due to the relative lack of distinction between direct and indirect speech in Japanese. See Flourian Coulmas, "Direct and Indirect Speech in Japanese," *Direct and Indirect Speech*, edited by Florian Coulmas (De Gruyter, Inc., 1986), 161–78.

[38] Yoda, "First-Person Narration," 289.

[39] Edward Fowler, *The Rhetoric of Confession;* Karatani, *Origins*.

[40] Miyoshi Masao, "Against the Native Grain," 154–55.

[41] Shibata Shōichi, "Honkaku Shōsetsu (Mizumura Minae) ni okeru 'katari'no kōzō: Hyōshō no jiyū to dokushakanyo no kanōsei wo megutte," 本格小説（水

村美苗）における「語り」の構造：表象の自由と読者関与の可能性をめぐって *Gengo bunka ronshū 言語文化論集* 25.2 (2004): 86.

[42] Karatani, *Origins,* 154.

[43] Mack, *Manufacturing Modern Japanese Literature*; Jacobowitz, *Writing Technology*; Karatani, *Origins*.

[44] Treat, *The Rise and Fall*.

[45] Ibid., 30–35.

[46] Ibid., 27–51. On such dangerous women, see Nina Cornyetz, *Dangerous Women, Deadly Words: Phallic Fantasy and Modernity in Three Japanese Writers.* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Christine Marran, *Poison Woman: Figuring Female Transgression in Modern Japanese Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

[47] Treat, *The Rise and Fall*, 30.

[48] Ibid., 100.

[49] Hannah Vose, "A True Novel," *Three Percent,* August 8, 2013, https://www.rochester.edu/College/translation/threepercent/2013/08/08/a-true-novel/. Accessed July 27, 2019.

[50] Kirino Natsuno, *OUT,* 99. Translated by Stephen Snyder. New York: Kodansha, 2003.

[51] Iyer, Introduction, vii.

[52] Mizumura Minae, *A True Novel,* translated by Juliet Winter Carpenter (New York: Other Press, 2002), 158.

[53] Caroline Bleeke, "Minae Mizumura's *A True Novel*," *Music & Literature, Inc.* Publisher and Editor Taylor Davis-Van Atta. Review, December 17, 2013, https://www.musicandliterature.org/reviews/2013/12/17/a-true-novel.

[54] Mizumura, *A True Novel,* 163.

[55] In order to distinguish between the author and the protagonist of the novel, I will refer to the character as "Minae" and the author as "Mizumura."

[56] Mizumura, *A True Novel*, 307.

[57] Ibid., 3, 148.

[58] Shibata, "*Honkaku Shōsetsu,"* 89. The words in quotation marks are from the novel.

[59] Ibid., 97.

[60] Kawasaki Akiko, "Toki no sayō: Kyōyō shōsetsu to shite no Mizumura Minae 'Honkaku Shōsetsu,'" 時の作用：教養小説としての水村美苗 *Komazawa*

Daigaku bungakubu kenkyū kiyō *駒澤大学文学部研究紀要* 65.3 (2007): 6.

[61] Ibid.,7.

[62] Mizumura, *A True Novel*, 820.

[63] Shibata, "*Honkaku Shōsetsu,"* 98.

[64] Davis, "Unimaginable Things," 10. Kirino is in fact her pen name as well (not an uncommon practice among Japanese writers). Her real name is Hashioka Mariko.

[65]Mark Schrieber, "From Romance to Murder," interview with Kirino, May 18, 2023, https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2003/05/18/books/book-reviews/from-romance-to-murder/#.XTW5V5NKghs. Accessed July 27, 2019.

[66] Kirino, *OUT*, 15.

[67] Ibid., 104.

[68] *Zainichi* continue to suffer discrimination in Japan, and as detailed in the novel, remain second-class citizens there.

[69] Kaneshiro Kazuki, *GO*, translated by Takami Nieda (Seattle: Amazon Crossing, 2000), 144.

[70] Ibid., 11.

[71] Mizumura, *A True Novel,* 88.

[72] Kawasaki, "Toki no sayō," 11.

[73] Raechel Dumas, "Domesticity, Criminality, and Part-Time Work: Female Bodily Economy in Kirino Natsuo's *Auto*," *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies* 13.3 (October 2013): 3.

[74] Amanda C. Seaman, "Inside OUT: Space, Gender and Power in Kirino Natsuo," *Japanese Language and Literature* 40.2 (Oct. 2006): 200.

[75] Ibid., 201.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Ibid.

[78] Dumas, "Domesticity, Criminality," 1.

[79] Ibid., 3.

[80] See also Takahashi Toshio, "*OUT* Kirino Natsuo *OUT* o saidoku suru," アウト桐野 夏生アウトを再読する *Ronza 論座* 41. 9 (1998): 268–71.

[81] Kaneshiro, *GO*, 1.

[82] Ibid., 118.

[83] Snyder, "Insistence and Resistance," 139–140.

[84] Shimada Masahiko, "Nakagami Kenji: Saigo no sakka." 中上健次：最後の作家 *Shūkan asahi 週刊朝日* (August 28, 1992): 34–36. Shimada uses the phrase in precisely the same sense that Mizumura discusses the *honkaku shōsetsu*. On Nakagami's *Kishū* see Nina Cornyetz, "Peninsular Cartography: Topology in Nakagami Kenji's Kishū," in *Perversion and Modern Japan: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Culture,* edited by Nina Cornyetz and J. Keith Vincent (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), 125–144; Margherita Long, "Nakagami and the Denial of Lineage: On Maternity, Abjection, and the Japanese Outcast Class," *Differences* 17.2 (September 2006): 1–32.

[85] Nakagami Kenji, *Kishū: Ki no kuni, ne no kuni monogatari 紀州木の国・根の国物語*, in *Nakagami Kenji Zenshū 中上健次全集* 14. Tokyo: Shūeisha, 1996, 479–679.

[86] Shimada Masahiko, *Dream Messenger* (*Yume tsukai: Rentaru chairudo no shin nito monogatari 夢使い： レンタルチャイルドの新二都物語*) translated by Philip Gabriel (New York and Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1992), 118.

[87] Nina Cornyetz, "Amorphous Identities, Disavowed History: Shimada Masahiko and National Subjectivity," *positions* 9.3 (Winter 2001): 602; Shimada Masahiko, *Katarazu, Utae 語らず、歌え* (Tokyo: Fukutake, 1991).

[88] Cornyetz, "Amorphous," 587.

[89] Amanda Stinchecum, "Who Tells the Tale?: 'Ukifune': A Study in Narrative Voice," *Monumenta Nipponica* 35.4 (Winter 1980): 375–403.

[90] Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, "Junsui ni 'Nihonteki' na Kyōka sekai," 純粋に日本的な鏡花世界 in *Izumi Kyōka*, *泉鏡花 Bungei Tokuhon 文藝読本* 37 (Tokyo: Kawade shobō shinsha, 1981), 67–68.

[91] Izumi Kyōka, *The Tale of the Enchanted Sword* (*Yōkenkibun 妖剣記聞*), translated and with an introduction by Nina Cornyetz, *The Asian Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 16, 6, no. 1 (March 15, 2018). https://apjjf.org/2018/06/Kyoka.html. Accessed September 6, 2023.

[92] Mizumura, *A True Novel,* 205–6.

[93] See Treat, *The Rise and Fall*; Cornyetz, *Dangerous Women*; Marran, *Poison Women*.

[94] Rebecca Copeland, "Woman Uncovered: Pornography and Power in the Detective Fiction of Kirino Natsuo," *Japan Forum* 16. 2 (2004): 249–69; Dumas, "Domesticity, Criminality"; Amanda C. Seaman, *Bodies of Evidence: Women, Society, and Detective Fiction in 1990s Japan* (Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).

[95] See Cornyetz, *Dangerous Women*.

[96] Ibid.

[97] Kaneshiro, *GO*, 22.

[98] Matsuura Hisaki, "Miru koto no heisoku.' 見ることの閉塞 *Shinchō 新潮* 6 (June 1992): 270.

[99] Kaneshiro, *GO,* 66.

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2003, https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2003/05/18/books/book-reviews/from-romance-to-murder/#.XTW5V5NKghs. Accessed July 27, 2019.

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