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Embodied and Embedded: Negotiating Public and Private Discourses of Violence in Japanese Texts

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This special section titled "Embodied and Embedded: Negotiating Public and Private Discourses of Violence in Japanese Texts" focuses on discursive representations of violence.[1] It thus contributes to an important conversation within Japanese letters regarding the ongoing legacy of ordinary violence and the ways in which ordinary literary characters deal with it. The inspiration for organizing this collection is an Association for Asian Studies panel which discussed the multivalent expressions violence takes (corporeal, emotional, sexual, and so on) within the pages of Japanese fiction, past and present.[2] The essays in this special section span the pre-modern literary terrain of the Heian (794–1185) and Muromachi (1392–1573) periods, delve into the murky underground of the recessionary 1990s, and profile characters learning to live in the post-3/11 climate.[3] Our contributors offer a lineage of sorts, of the ways in which authors engage with violence in everyday life, mass culture, and the public sphere at large.

To call violence "ordinary," as I do above, is to evoke the oxymoronic, the contradictory, the paradoxical. By design, violence cannot be, or at least should not be, ordinary or normative. Violence is, or at least should be, confined to rupture, to event. Philosopher Slavoj Zizek suggests that "a perturbation of the 'normal,' peaceful state of things" defines the most common conceptualizations of violence—those which he calls "subjective."[4] Yet, the literary works profiled by our contributors illuminate lives conditioned by rupture. These are lives lived on the margins, beyond the reach of normativity, where violence is indeed the norm. Our contributors are interested in the ways in which authors evoke violence that is embedded in the everyday; they are invested in how the dynamics of everyday life give rise to violent experiences. (Zizek calls this

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"objective" or "invisible" violence.[5]) At the same time, and more importantly, our contributors are invested in how literary characters negotiate the non-negotiable.

The body is of the utmost importance here. The essays that follow work together because of their collective focus on the confluence of materiality, the body, and, of course, violence. We begin with Sachi Schmidt-Hori's "Symbolic Death and Rebirth into Womanhood: An Analysis of Stepdaughter Narratives from Heian and Medieval Japan," an examination of five *mamako banashi* (継子話), or stepchild tales, from the pre-modern period: *Ochikubo monogatari* (Tale of Ochikubo), *Sumiyoshi monogatari* (Tale of Sumiyoshi), *Hachi-kazuki* (Bowl bearer), *Hanayo no Hime* (Lady Hanayo), and *Ubakawa* (The crone fleece).[6] Importantly, these tales are concerned with, as Schmidt-Hori says, "intra-female aggression," given that it is the stepmother who proves formidable, directing her ire toward the stepdaughter. Schmidt-Hori goes against the grain in this essay, arguing that it is not jealousy that pits stepmother against stepdaughter (as is the common presumption), but rather deep inter-family dynamics. In such stories, the stepdaughter's body becomes a site of violence that provides insight into the dynamic clockwork of pre-modern gender relations and expressions of violence.

Indeed, Schmidt-Hori instructs us that pre-modern audiences did not look favorably on middle-aged women (i.e., stepmothers) and accepted that women were inherently jealous of one another and could turn vicious. These stereotypes, as we know, persist today in a variety of contexts. The evil stepmother trope elevates the maternal role, and casts no aspersions against the biological mother. At the same time, the trope mocks women who fail to become mothers themselves. In this context, it is important to note that the stepdaughters in these stepchild tales are proxies for the stories' young readers. As such, the narratives function didactically, Schmidt-Hori asserts. And the violence to which they are subject is largely psychological and therefore gendered. As Schmidt-Hori explains, *mamako banashi* stand out against other Heian/Muromachi narratives that are often concerned with the behavior of violent men. While male violence is often physical, she points out, the violence underpinning *mamako banashi* can be emotional or psychological. In her piece, Schmidt-Hori outlines the kinds of abuse to which the stepdaughters are subject. This torment is meant to be adversarial, and in many cases the stepdaughter emerges triumphant over her rival and better off. Schmidt-Hori holds that the

stepdaughters' plight teaches readers about the virtues of perseverance and the persistence of hope in the face of adversity.

In Doug Slaymaker's "Pregnant Violence in Post-3.11 Fiction," we find a similar purpose in violence.[7] Slaymaker's essay "explores the violence and the threat of violence associated with pregnancy in Japanese fiction after the triple disasters" of 3/11. Slaymaker's main interest is in how authors represent the threat of radiation, which, in his words, is "in-sensible, non-sensible, non-sensical." His observations are prescient and may remind us of the true nature of violence as that which has neither rhyme nor reason. The violence endemic to the triple disaster confounds and confuses because it is so random.

In this light, I am reminded of Azuma Hiroki's "The Disaster Broke Us Apart," in which the author argues exactly this point: that the disaster makes no sense, and that who lived and who died was ultimately a matter of chance.[8] Azuma claims that although this is the case, natural disasters *can* bring people together, but that this did not happen in the case of 3/11. He asserts that the disaster disassociated one Japanese from another, that the nation as a whole became "fragmented"; Slaymaker highlights this affective loneliness vis-à-vis his discussion of "disaster divorce" (or *genpatsu rikon*) and the ways in which the disaster was literally and figuratively violent: it physically ripped apart houses, and physically as well as emotionally ripped apart families. The issue of "disaster divorce" exposes fault lines in the family dynamic as well as Japanese social life at large.[9]

The disaster itself reminds us that issues of gender are never at rest. Slaymaker's study of gender in the aftermath of 3/11 illuminates social processes that tie women to the narrative of recovery. Women's socially prescribed roles as caregivers and mothers feed into a discourse in which women themselves become protectors of the family and defenders of the home. In the context of the disaster, radiation was the invisible threat with which women/mothers were forced to grapple. Slaymaker's analyses of fiction and film from the post-disaster era demonstrate that during traumatic times gender roles can become unstable. In author Kanehara Hitomi's *Motazaru mono*, for example, it is husband Shu who rushes to seal the cracks and crevices in the house (traditionally the domestic/feminine realm) with duct tape. Here, the patriarch confronts the invisible threat of radiation and in so doing asks readers to think about who or what he is protecting. He is, of course, protecting the future. This scene reflects Lee Edelman's argument that futurity as such falls squarely on the

shoulders of children who are "the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmic beneficiary of every political intervention."[10] In Kanehara's novel, it is the mother's body that must be protected from the violence of the disaster. The future, it seems, depends on it. Thus, as much as 3/11 split families apart, it brought some together as well.

In David Holloway's contribution to the special section, he presents a reading of author Sakurai Ami's *Tumorōzu songu* (Tomorrow's song) from the position of "no future." The novel offers a sustained account of how young Japanese might disavow the specter of the future in favor of the draw of the present. Protagonist Akari is confronted with the possibility that she may be HIV-positive. Her immediate response is to live fast, recklessly, and dangerously. Without medical intervention, HIV represents what cultural theorist Lauren Berlant terms "slow death"—or the erosion or wearing out of the self. Berlant argues that "in the scene of slow death, a condition of being worn out by the activity of reproducing life, agency can be an activity of maintenance, not making; fantasy, without grandiosity; sentience, without full intentionality; inconsistency, without shattering; embodying, alongside embodiment."[11] Violence is invisible in this instance, HIV wreaking quiet havoc on the body. Yet in the text, the violence from within is reflected externally in terms of domestic violence, domestic terrorism, and rape. Akari is frequently the object of abuse, and Holloway reads these expressions of violence, including HIV, as punishment for a life of transgression. Akari, who lives with boyfriend Sid, resists Japanese cultural hegemony by insisting on a life out of bounds, including drinking and drug use. There is no future here, just temporary sovereignty. Michel Foucault posits that sovereignty "is not the right to put people to death or to grant them life. Nor is it the right to allow people to live or to leave them to die. It is the right to take life or let live."[12] The choices Akari makes, Holloway argues, are not expressions of personal agency, so much as they are choices influenced by the biopolitical state.

That is, Holloway holds that Akari's choices to live for the present occurs against a biopolitical backdrop that has excluded Japan's young people. Why should Akari live for tomorrow when tomorrow offers no promises? On the one hand, Japanese youth frequently feel as though the state has robbed them of access to the future. The rigors of the Japanese education system take their toll on those forced to carry the intellectual burden of a Japan lacking the promises of middle-class comforts. On the

other hand, the unspoken backdrop to the novel is the infiltration of HIV into the Japanese body in the 1980s. The novel, then, contributes to an emergent—if nascent—conversation regarding the body, transgression, and internal and external violence.

Sakurai's text focuses on the idea of *pseudo*-sovereignty and the illusion of agency in the face of gendered social dynamics. So, too, does Kawakami Mieko's fiction, according to Juliana Buriticá Alzate. In her piece, Buriticá Alzate looks closely at the intersection of embodiment and gender as represented in Kawakami Mieko's *Chichi to ran* (Breasts and eggs). In particular, Buriticá Alzate "examines how Kawakami problematizes agency vis-à-vis cultural and economic mechanisms that enact violence on the female body, and fix gender roles in a male-dominated, neoliberal society through an analysis of the portrayal of menstruation, reproduction, beauty ideals, and mothering from a feminist perspective."[13] Written in the Kansai dialect, and told from the perspective of Natsu, the novella offers great insight into the gendered nature of family dynamics. Sister Makiko, who is approaching middle age, has traveled to Osaka to undergo breast enhancement surgery, while niece Midoriko is on the verge of adolescence and therefore undergoing her own transition. Buriticá Alzate devotes considerable time to Kawakami's approach to menarche and menstruation in general.

As such, Buriticá Alzate argues that "*Chichi to ran* is one of the few literary works that contribute to the creation of a new imagery of menstruation favoring healthier menstrual socialization in puberty, an awareness of stigmas and preconceptions, and an inclusion of the menstrual experience in the accounts of embodied experiences." Here, it seems, Kawakami is reacting (to cite Elizabeth Grosz) "to the pervasively misogynistic treatment of women's bodies, and to the various patriarchal attempts to reduce women to their bodies when these bodies have been conceived in the most narrowly functionalist and reductionist terms."[14] Kawakami celebrates the female body and identifies its biological clockwork as a locus for empowerment and solidarity. There is a whisper of essentialism here, in Kawakami's novel. Is the female body essentially different from the male body? This is an important issue that *Chichi to ran* raises, even if it is not a central concern of Buriticá Alzate's essay.

What Buriticá Alzate does, however, is demonstrate the ways in which Kawakami combats patriarchal and misogynistic discourse surrounding the female body. Blood is power for Kawakami, a stance that is anathema to cultural reproductions of femininity which construe the female body,

especially the bleeding female body, as reprehensible. "Female bleeding," Nina Cornyetz reminds us, can stand for "female uncleanliness, stickiness, viscosity, fluidity, and boundlessness."[15] Here Cornyetz is writing of author Enchi Fumiko's celebrated novel *Onnamen* (女面 *Masks)*. She continues: "In Enchi's *Masks*, blood functions as an index of female identity and as a marker of pollution and divinity. Blood further forms the basis upon which a community of women, exclusive of men, is constructed."[16] Her reading of *Masks* resonates with Buriticá Alzate's interpretation of *Chichi to ran*, for Buriticá Alzate, too, finds solidarity and identity vis-à-vis menstrual blood. Cornyetz continues, citing Grosz:

> Could the reduction of men's body fluids to the by-products of pleasure and the raw materials of reproduction, along with men's refusal to acknowledge the effects of flows that move through various parts of the body and from the inside out, have to do with men's attempt to distance themselves from the very kind of corporeality—uncontrollable, excessive, expansive, disruptive, irrational—they have attributed to women?[17]

Kawakami, then, engages this discourse, establishing a dialog with Enchi's work and contributing to a lineage of female-authored texts that use blood to combat entrenched patriarchal ideas.

The last essay in this special section, Grace En-Yi Ting's "Ogawa Yōko and the Horrific Femininities of Daily Life," continues the discussion of female-centric tropes.[18] If blood is gendered female, as we have seen, so too is the domestic realm of daily life. Or so Ting contends in her study of Ogawa's use of domestic spaces. Through close readings of several of Ogawa's works, Ting "examine[s] women whose desires and bodily states merge with food and domestic spaces and food in an unsettling everyday characterized by disgust and even horror [….] These women differ in terms of age and physical appearance but share a dark connection to daily life, especially in terms of sweets, other food, and domestic, private spaces."[19] Ting describes the ways in which everyday life is gendered. In modern Japan, public/private life reflects the gendered division of labor, wherein public life is rendered masculine or male and private life feminine or female. In Ogawa's fiction, the difference between these masculine and feminine realms is sharp.

One important arena of domesticity for Ogawa is the kitchen. This is not an idealized space for Ogawa, not a space of feminine communion and warmth. Rather, the kitchen—as Ting offers in her reading of Ogawa's *Revenge*—is oppressive and inhospitable. There is violence, even murder,

in Ogawa's kitchen. And in writing this way, Ting holds, Ogawa breathes fresh air into a recalcitrant narrative of female subjectivity that positions women as happy homemakers. Readers of Ting's piece may therefore be reminded of Betty Friedan's attack on the myth of the happy housewife. Toiling in a "comfortable concentration camp," the housewife in 1950s America represented to Friedan the erasure of female identity.[20] She writes: "I am convinced there is something about the housewife state itself that is dangerous."[21] Interestingly, Ogawa makes the housewife/homemaker herself dangerous. She may be dangerous with butcher knife in hand. Or, more to Ting's point, she may be dangerous in terms of what she represents—domesticity run afoul. As Ting states, Ogawa's fiction bursts with rotten food—the kitchen neglected. Ting writes: "[F]ood plays a major role in producing unpleasant atmospheres in kitchens, with half-eaten food and ingredients spilled out onto the floor, rotten seafood, and monstrous vegetables."[22] At the same time, however, Ogawa deploys sweet foods as a means of unsettling readers' expectations regarding gender. Thus, to quote Ting again, "In [Ogawa's] scenes of the everyday, striking, sometimes repulsive depictions of sweetness perform a major role in exploring and critiquing femininities through a female homosocial process in which characters seek self-knowledge or express their dissatisfaction with gender norms through their scrutiny of other women."[23]

Food stands for female embodiment and (sexual) desire. This is especially the case with sweets, because women have historically been aligned with the sweet, the delectable, and therefore the trivial. And in grappling with this trope, Ting continues, Ogawa works to liberate female subjectivity from the trappings of, in Ting's words, "empty pleasure." As such, again, to quote Ting: "Ogawa does well with the complexity of how she weaves both the gendered disgust and excitement of sweetness into scenes of kitchens and other spaces of food, leaving the reader with ambivalent images of women and what they want." In total, Ogawa works to rewrite narratives of female subordination and subjectivity.

The rewriting of gendered narratives of subordination and subjectivity is what unites the studies in this special section. Through our collective analyses, we bring together Japanese cultural artifacts—primarily literary text but also film—to demonstrate the multivalent ways in which ordinary women in ordinary circumstances deal with ordinary violence. As the reader will see, this violence can be delimiting at times. Yet violence itself comes to serve as an egress to change and personal development for

literary and filmic characters who have been dealt difficult and unfair circumstances. We offer close readings that are grounded in particular cultural and historical moments that, in turn, illuminate both the shifting, diachronic nature of violence and its gendered implications and strategies women have adopted to cope with and, more importantly, overcome violence. By engaging with cultural texts that, at first glance, can feel so far removed from each other historically, the contributors offer an in-depth look at how expressions of gendered violence—and strategies to overcome that violence—change over time. To be sure, through our analyses and readings, we demonstrate that expressions of gendered violence can be informed by the historical moment in which they take place. From Heian/Muromachi court life to the precarity of post-3/11, we find that violence does not discriminate. Yet, and to reiterate, the ways in which literary characters persevere through said violence offers a chance to put seemingly disparate texts in dialog with one another. We encourage you to listen to what they have to say to each other.

NOTES

[1] My thanks to the anonymous readers of *Japanese Language and Literature* for their feedback and to journal editor Anne Sokolsky for her enduring patience and keen editorial skills.

[2] The Association for Asian Studies panel was titled "Violent Entanglements with the Female Body in Modern Japanese Fiction," and took place in March 2018 at the conference held in Washington, D. C.

[3] Haruo Shirane, *Traditional Japanese Literature: An Anthology, Beginnings to 1600* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

[4] Slavoj Zizek, *Violence* (New York: Picador, 2008), 2.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Sachi Schmidt-Hori, (this volume) "Symbolic Death and Rebirth into Womanhood: An Analysis of Stepdaughter Narratives from Heian and Medieval Japan." *Japanese Language and Literature* 54: 447–475.

[7] Doug Slaymaker, (this volume) "Pregnant Violence in Post-3.11 Fiction." *Japanese Language Literature* 54: 477–492.

[8] Azuma Hiroki, "The Disaster Broke Us Apart," *Shisōchizu beta* 2 (2011): 8–17.

[9] Ibid., 222.

[10] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 3.

[11] Lauren Berlant, “Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency),” *Critical Inquiry* 33 (2007): 759.

[12] Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76* (London: Penguin), 241.

[13] Juliana Buriticá Alzate, (this volume) “Embodiment and Its Violence in Kawakami Mieko’s *Chichi to ran*: Menstruation, Beauty Ideals, and Mothering.” *Japanese Language and Literature* 54: 515–549.

[14] Elizabeth Grosz, “Introduction,” *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* (September 1991): 1.

[15] Nina Cornyetz, *Dangerous Women, Deadly Words: Phallic Fantasy and Modernity in Three Japanese Writers* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), 117.

[16] Ibid., 115.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Grace En-Yi Ting, (this volume) “Ogawa Yōko and the Horrific Femininities of Daily Life.” *Japanese Language and Literature* 54: 551–582.

[19] Ibid., 569.

[20] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1963), 393.

[21] Ibid., 422.

[22] Ting, “Ogawa Yōko,” 560.

[23] Ibid.