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Ogawa Yōko and the Horrific Femininities of Daily Life

Grace En-Yi Ting

In the 2003 novel *Hakase no ai-shita sūshiki* (博士の愛した数式, *The Housekeeper and the Professor*) by Ogawa Yōko (小川洋子, 1962–), a housekeeper, her son, and a retired mathematician known only as the “Professor” build unexpected intimacy through the daily routines and domestic spaces of the everyday.¹ After an accident many years ago, the Professor’s memory only lasts for eighty minutes at a time, and he makes sense of time passing only through countless notes attached to his suit as a peculiar sort of diary. After the housekeeper begins bringing her son to the Professor’s house while she works, the three of them form a fragile yet meaningful relationship. The kitchen and dining area of the house become the setting for a surprising process of intimacy through daily routines centering around the Professor’s explanations of math, her son’s homework, meals and other chores, and baseball games on the radio.

The housekeeper brings a simple yet elegant form of order to the life of the Professor, taking care of his physical needs (cooking, cleaning) as well as his emotional ones with her and her son’s companionship. The Professor is the one who discovers the brilliance inherent in her humble work, observing intently as she goes through steps such as cutting onions, cracking eggs, and coating meat with flour. Through his eyes, cooking takes on a beautiful sense of order, precision, and mystique parallel to that of the world of mathematics, causing the narrator to be “filled suddenly with an absurd sense of satisfaction” upon seeing the ordinary dishes she has prepared, as if she herself has just solved an impossible math theorem.² The connection found in the beauty and wonder of both household chores and mathematics is strengthened by another depiction in which the Professor’s own skill with housework is suddenly revealed when he irons a tablecloth for the narrator’s son’s birthday party. He sprays water, eyes



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the tablecloth, and then works “with precision and conviction, and even a kind of affection...highly rational, with a constant speed that allowed him to get the best results with the least effort; all the economy and elegance of his mathematical proofs performed right there on the ironing board.”³

Hakase no ai-shita sūshiki works as a meditation upon the value of “going through the motions” in everyday life, with the characters coming to share inexplicably deep affection and loyalty. The intimacy between the housekeeper and her son—whom she is raising alone—and the Professor—shut out from normative forms of happiness and intimacy by his disability—is not romantic love, nor is it familial love or any other type recognized by society. But through the routines of the everyday and its limited spaces, especially the kitchen, Ogawa depicts the three coming together almost miraculously for a brief time.

For those first encountering Ogawa through the warm descriptions of the everyday in *Hakase no ai-shita sūshiki*, one of her most acclaimed works, her earlier fiction might come as a surprise with its much darker representations of everyday life, critiquing discourses that enforce normative femininities associating women with food and domestic spaces. With my use of “femininity” and “femininities,” I refer to qualities associated with women, with an emphasis on plurality due to how these vary according to cultural or historical context and are *not* tied to biological traits. Normative, conventional, or stereotypical femininities—often simply discussed as “femininity” in everyday usage—refer to mainstream, often restrictive cultural expectations concerning women’s appearances and behavior.

Hakase no ai-shita sūshiki goes so far as to equate cooking and ironing with the elegant beauty of mathematics, but in Ogawa’s earlier works, she emphasizes violence and rage as constant undercurrents in the lives of women trapped by ideals of domesticity. In these stories, female bodies remain confined to the squalor of spaces of daily life, estranged from tender versions of intimacy and domesticity seen later in *Hakase no ai-shita sūshiki*. Writing several years after Ogawa’s debut in the late 1980s, gender studies scholar Noriko Mizuta observes the visceral disgust towards daily routine shown in Ogawa’s works, with female characters openly displaying “their hatred for the dirty and disorderly bodily organs, their hatred for a life of ‘eating, sleeping, and taking out the garbage’—a life of sex, childbirth, illness, and finally death.”⁴

In my following readings of Ogawa’s works—with a focus on the short story collection *Kamoku-na shigai, midara na tomurai* (寡黙な死骸

みだらな帯い, *Revenge: Eleven Dark Tales*, 1998) and several other early works—I examine women whose desires and bodily states merge with food and domestic spaces in an unsettling everyday characterized by disgust and even horror.⁵ I explore how Ogawa’s stories critique conventional femininities, rejecting, mocking, and playing with them to powerfully suggest how their construction places a burden on women in contemporary Japan. Her representations argue against discourses enforcing expectations for women to be caring, nurturing, or sweet, or—alternately—belittling them as overly emotional, irrational, or vocal, while relegating them to private, domestic spaces. Ogawa’s writing also reflects pleasure in acts of transgression and appropriation with these femininities, suggesting the agency of storytelling as a violent, unstable process, seen in her own depictions of women and creative acts in *Kamoku-na shigai*.

First, I describe food and kitchens, housewives and other women seen in the stories “Yōgashiya no gogo” (洋菓子屋の午後, Afternoon at the Bakery) and “Rōba J” (老婆 J, Old Lady J) in *Kamoku-na shigai*, reading these depictions of spiraling madness and murder against the context of postwar Japanese discourses promoting ideals of the housewife and domesticity. The grieving mother in the kitchen in “Yōgashiya no gogo,” along with the female author chopping grotesque vegetables from her witch-like landlady in “Rōba J,” go against mainstream conceptions of what should happen in domestic spaces properly overseen by women, setting the background for my readings of Ogawa’s other stories also dealing with food and domestic spaces.

The following section shifts the focus of my argument to a specific category of food: sweets—e. g., cake, jam, ice cream—appearing throughout Ogawa’s work, particularly in representations emphasizing ambivalent encounters between women in daily life. In these stories, female protagonists look for self-knowledge, probing into the nature of femininities through their intense observation of other women, often with detailed views of the grotesque appearances and transformations of other female bodies. Ogawa’s spectacles of sweetness act as a pointed critique of perspectives framing women as sweet, decorative, shallow, trivial, or self-indulgent, instead articulating dark anxieties and dangerous, violent forms of desire found within scenes of the mundane. This type of critique appears not only in *Kamoku-na shigai*, but also with a young woman observing her pregnant sister and making jam in the short story “Ninshin karendā” (妊娠カレンダー, Pregnancy Diary, 1991), as well as the female narrator’s fascinated gaze at an older waitress in a scene featuring a

colossal ice cream dessert in the novel *Shugā taimu* (シュガータイム, *Sugar time*, 1991).

After performing readings of femininities, food, and domestic spaces in contexts of female homosociality, I move on to discuss the distinction between such depictions and Ogawa's writing of masculinities, seen in heterosexual encounters. *Kamoku-na shigai* suggests the unsympathetic nature of husbands and male lovers, juxtaposed against more idealized encounters with obliging boys and young men. I flesh out readings of *Kamoku-na shigai* by outlining ways in which they reference other well-known early works by Ogawa that highlight the flawless beauty of young male bodies against the disorder of women's experiences of domestic spaces. Finally, I conclude by returning to the contrast between *Hakase no ai-shita sūshiki* and the other works taken up in this essay to consider how to bring together these two sides of everyday life in Ogawa's writing.

Ogawa's striking representations of women and their bodies, food, and domestic spaces—as well as their distinct contrast with youthful male bodies—should be read in terms of a broader feminist critique of discourses associating women with private, domestic spaces. Feminist scholar Naomi Schor argues that discourses of everyday life often depend upon a binary of a “masculine,” public everyday, containing potential in terms of revolution, and a “feminine” everyday, defined by “the daily rituals of private life carried out within the domestic sphere traditionally presided over by women.”⁶ Similarly, critiquing the masculine bias seen in work by Henri Lefebvre and other major theorists of the everyday, Rita Felski interrogates ways in which “Lefebvre...regards women as the quintessential representatives and victims of the quotidian,” such that negative versions of daily life—defined in terms of inaction, trivial routine, and convention—become associated with women and their bodies.⁷

In her early writing, Ogawa engages forcefully with the anxieties and frustration of women forced to perform prescribed roles in private, domestic spaces of the everyday. While such texts taken up in this essay span the period of about a decade from the late 1980s to the late 1990s, their critique still reads as relevant today for problematizing contexts in which women are consistently associated with acts of food preparation or consumption, or read in terms of excessive emotion and bodily functions, in contrast with “masculine” qualities of logic and the mind. With their abundant disgust and horror, Ogawa's stories ask us to continue to reflect upon the nature of gender norms embedded in easily overlooked corners of daily life.

Death and Violence in the Housewife's Domain

In the collection *Kamoku-na shigai*, short stories build upon characters and/or settings from previous works, forming a collection of linked stories with different first-person narrators. Figure 1 provides a full list of stories:

- “Yōgashiya no gogo” (洋菓子屋の午後, “Afternoon at the Bakery”)
Female narrator buys a cake for her dead son
- “Kajū” (果汁, “Fruit Juice”)
Young male narrator goes with a female classmate to meet her estranged father
- “Rōba J” (老婆 J, “Old Lady J”)
Female narrator observes suspicious happenings surrounding her old landlady
- “Nemuri no sei” (眠りの精, “The Little Dustman”)
Male narrator heads to the funeral of his former stepmother
- “Hakui” (白衣, “Lab Coats”)
Female narrator at a hospital hears her colleague’s confession of murder
- “Shinzō no karinui” (心臓の仮縫い, “Sewing for the Heart”)
Male narrator is commissioned to make a bag for a woman’s heart
- “Gōmon hakubutsukan e yōkoso” (拷問博物館へようこそ, “Welcome to the Museum of Torture”)
Female narrator fascinated by incidents of death comes across a museum
- “Gibusu o uru hito” (ギブスを売る人, “The Man Who Sold Braces”)
Male narrator recalls the life of his eccentric uncle
- “Bengaru tora no rinjū” (ベンガル虎の臨終, “The Last Hour of the Bengal Tiger”)
Female narrator goes to find her husband’s female lover
- “Tomato to mangetsu” (トマトと満月, “Tomatoes and the Full Moon”)
Male narrator meets a peculiar female author
- “Dokusō” (毒草, “Poison Plants”)
Female narrator orchestrates her relationship with a young male composer

Figure 1: Stories of *Kamoku-na shigai*, *midara na tomurai*

Full of violence and strange occurrences, these stories are elegantly described by Kanda Noriko as “variations on madness,” taking place in a claustrophobic space where death (literally) happens next door.⁸ The stories alternate between female and male narrators, but arguably, the inappropriate desires and emotions of women form the backbone for the dark interwoven tales of the collection. Female narrators often seem less reliable, swept up in uncontrollable waves of mental instability and obsession, while most male narrators speak in more lucid tones of observation. In response to discourses marking women as overly emotional and illogical, in these stories, Ogawa creates female characters who truly *have* gone mad, past the point of caring as they are driven off the edge by frustration towards such stereotypes and expectations permeating their everyday lives.⁹

The first image upended in *Kamoku-na shigai* is that of the housewife, the female figure at the center of discourses of domesticity in Japan. Jan Bardsley describes the contradictory identity of the *shufu* (主婦), or postwar housewife, in Japan as “a kitchen princess freed and constrained by her domestic life,” reigning over, yet simultaneously subjugated by, an idealized, Americanized space defined by modern appliances.¹⁰ In Bardsley’s account of the well-known housewife debate of 1955, she details how journalist Ishigaki Ayako critically characterized the postwar Japanese housewife as “a woman absorbed in concern for the trivial, for the minutiae of home life, fashion, and beauty, and consequently as someone unable to engage in any taxing matters at all.”¹¹ While this definition fails to address the considerable contributions of domestic labor, Ishigaki’s comments offer a vivid image of expectations and aspirations surrounding the figure of the housewife.

Moving forward in time, the role of the housewife does indeed change, but possibly in ways simply reformulating and strengthening expectations of beauty, fashion, and domestic excellence. In her analysis of the popular women’s magazine *Very*, launched in 1995, Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni marks a shift from a “practical” image of the housewife to the new image of “a fashionable housewife” refashioned through the cute, shallow aesthetics and desires of the *shōjo* (少女), or girl.¹² Women’s magazines such as *Very* were promoting “youth, cuteness, fashion, and self-enjoyment” in “the creation of...the tribe of happy and fashionable housewives” around the time when *Kamoku-na shigai* was written in the late 1990s.¹³

As a clear contrast to these images in popular media, we find little girlish pleasure in fulfilling a role as a housewife in Ogawa’s stories, with

a rejection of glossy, attractive images of the Japanese housewife and her domestic labor. “Yōgashiya no gogo,” the first story of *Kamoku-na shigai*, presents us with the spectacle of the female narrator contorting her body to shut herself away in a refrigerator. Years ago, her six-year-old son was found suffocated in a broken refrigerator in a junkyard. In the present, every detail still clear in her mind, she recalls his body frozen in death in the darkness, “curled up in an ingenious fashion to fit between the shelves and the egg box, with his legs carefully folded and his face tucked between his knees.”¹⁴ Not long after his death, she performs a ghastly reenactment in her kitchen. Throwing out leftover potato salad, cabbage, wilted spinach, and yogurt, she climbs inside, wondering, “Where does death come from?”¹⁵ In the damp, dark space of the refrigerator, she waits for death until her husband—increasingly disturbed by her show of grief—discovers her and pulls her out, striking her in his anger.

Ogawa’s writing of this perverse female narrator—who stuffs herself into a refrigerator—reads as darkly humorous against images of the proper, joyful *shufu*. In “Yōgashiya no gogo,” the housewife-narrator no longer implements order and comfort for her family in the kitchen, a space serving as an extension of her being. In clear opposition to these expectations, the narrator’s uncontrollable emotions materialize through the chaos of food spilling out of bounds, her feminine domain turning overnight into a surreal space of death and horror, which eventually drives the husband away. Significantly, literary critic Higashi Masao calls attention to the role of the refrigerator, washing machine, and vacuum cleaner in defining the postwar Japanese household. He calls the refrigerator “the most popular electrical appliance among these, one embodying ‘domesticity’ itself” and remarks upon the brilliance of Ogawa’s macabre transformation of the refrigerator that turns it into a “landmark of the underworld akin to the gates of hell.”¹⁶

While Stephen Snyder’s translation simply reads, *Revenge: Eleven Dark Tales*, the literal meaning of the Japanese title can be translated as, “Silent corpses, obscene mourning,” referring to specific images scattered throughout the stories. Accordingly, within the refrigerator of “Yōgashiya no gogo”—a symbol of modern convenience where one expects to find fresh produce and other ordinary food—one instead discovers the “silent corpse” of a small boy, then the body of a mother engrossed in “obscene mourning,” coming together to reflect the two parts of Ogawa’s original title for the collection.

Not only horrifying rituals of mourning, but also surreal forms of murder take place in the kitchens of *Kamoku-na shigai*. In “Rōba J,” a female novelist passively observes her own kitchen turn into a quiet scene of violence under the sway of an old landlady, whose murderous tendencies shape the landscape of the apartment building she governs. The narrator says little about herself but acts as a witness to strange occurrences surrounding the eccentric landlady, depicted in witch-like terms: “Her face was narrow and her chin long and pointed. She had a flat nose, and her eyes were set widely apart in a way that gave the middle of her face a strange blankness. When she spoke, her bones seemed to grind together with each word...”¹⁷ Later in my essay, I take up depictions specifically of female gazes upon other women alongside images of sweets, but “Rōba J” also acts as an example of eerie female homosocial surveillance.

As in many of Ogawa’s stories, in “Rōba J,” distorted forms of intimacy and violence appear in places usually structured by expectations of kindness and comfort from women. Intruding with endless complaints and unwanted gifts, the old woman turns the narrator’s home into a stifling, uneasy space with her frequent visits. “Neighborly” favors from Mrs. J are highly suspicious. Once, Mrs. J receives a package for the narrator and keeps it for days before finally passing it on to her, with an overdone performance of graciousness. The narrator finds long expired, rotten scallops with a horrible stench, opening the package to watch as “the scallop and viscera poured out in a liquid mass” thanks to Mrs. J’s act of generosity.¹⁸

This increasing sense of unease builds in the narrative when one day Mrs. J rushes into the narrator’s apartment with a strange gift from her garden: carrots shaped like human hands. Accepting the carrots, the narrator chops them into potato salad, slicing off each “finger” at the base and later noting at dinner, “my potato salad had bits of the pinkie and the index finger.”¹⁹ The first carrot looks like a chubby baby’s hand, but the many others appearing later take on all sorts of shapes: “Some were long and slender, like the hands of a pianist; others were sturdier, like those of a lumberjack. There were all sorts: swollen hands, hairy hands, blotchy hands...”²⁰ Scattered in potato salad and other ordinary dishes, the vividly described variety of hands suggests the horror of murder cropping up in the most innocuous moments of the everyday, such as at the dinner table.

At the end of the story, two policemen visit the narrator to inquire about Mrs. J’s missing husband, and she tells them about seeing the old

woman drag a large box across the orchard behind the apartment building in the night. By the garden, they unearth a skeleton missing its hands and wrists, which they identify as the missing husband, strangled by Mrs. J's nightgown. With the missing hands and wrists representing the violent severing of male authority, the landlady's apartment building, garden, and orchard—lush with exotic vegetation, where bats take shelter—radiate the old woman's hideous energies. The police fail to find the missing hands and wrists after numerous searches; the reader is left to imagine how the narrator—and Mrs. J—have already chopped up these other body parts for use in everyday cooking in perverted acts of domestic creativity.

Compared with Mrs. J, the narrator appears innocent at first, an unwilling witness to the landlady's murderous acts. But if Mrs. J continually violates her privacy, she also participates in surveillance of the old woman making her similarly suspicious as a character. From across the courtyard, she follows every minor detail of Mrs. J's dreary routine during the day as well as her suspicious activities at night. One night, she sees the old woman massaging a large middle-aged man under the moonlight. As she crouches over the man in her bed, the old woman seems to “[grow] more powerful, wringing the life from his body” like a strange beast as the man slowly deflates beneath her.²¹ The landlady's witch-like hands call forth the frightening possibility that women's hands not only soothe and provide comfort but also possess terrifying strength capable of strangling men.

In her study of violent women in contemporary art cinema, Janice Loreck traces “a desire for knowledge of the violent woman, and a drive to represent this transgressive femininity,” indicating how violent women serve as an endless source of fascination due to how they “undermine conceptions of female passivity and male aggression.”²² And despite the narrator's harmless appearance, her extreme fascination with Mrs. J implicates her as well. With no outward show of protest or judgment, she passively cooks the hand-shaped carrots from the old landlady. When the local newspaper decides to do a story on the carrots, she ends up posing for a picture with the landlady. Standing side by side with the old woman, she appears to be an accomplice to her murderous acts, with surprisingly little distance existing between her and the hideous, witch-like Mrs. J.

Ogawa's writing spectacularly overturns both old and new assumptions about the Japanese housewife through her production of fearsome femininities, *not* proper, pleasing, or pleasant ones. Moreover, her spectacles of female grief and murder appropriate gendered

assumptions that essentialize women in terms of uncontrollable emotions and unstable mental states, while her genre of “domestic horror” performs pleasure derived in the upheaval of kitchens and households.²³ Writing about transgressive possibilities of the monstrous-feminine in Japanese horror films, Raechel Dumas remarks upon how “[t]he kitchen, a site of nurture, becomes a locus of violence,” such as in scenes of possessed women turned “into vessels of unmitigated horror that demand to be contained.”²⁴ Similarly, through her critique of discourses binding women to food and domestic spaces, Ogawa simultaneously reveals terrifying, yet thrilling alternate possibilities for female existence.

The Terrifying Spectacle of Sweetness and Female Desire

In the scenes described above, food 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. However, Ogawa’s writing is characterized more specifically by the conspicuous appearance of *sweet* foods, specifically in conjunction with female protagonists directing their gazes towards other women. In her 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.

In “Yōgashiya no gogo,” we found a narrator shutting herself into a refrigerator in her kitchen, but the story begins in a bakery with her annual errand: buying a birthday cake for her dead son in her endless act of “obscene mourning.” Traveling from bakeries to the narrator’s household each year, cakes fill the story with their spectral presence. The narrator recalls that, after her son’s death, she kept the birthday cake she had just bought for him—a strawberry shortcake covered with fluffy whipped cream—watching day by day as the cake spoiled, turning misshapen and discolored from mold in its own slow death. When her husband ordered her to throw the cake away, she hurled it in his face, splattering mold and crumbs over him, while “a terrible smell filled the room...like breathing in death.”²⁵

In the bakery where she goes to buy the cake, seemingly trivial interactions occur between the female narrator and other women, with the significance of these encounters left unexplained: while waiting, she tells a kind older woman about the death of her son; she remembers the

distraught woman who discovered her son in the refrigerator; and finally, she stares at the bakery employee in an unsettling moment of voyeurism. Although the bakery initially seems unattended, the narrator notices the young woman hidden away in a corner of the kitchen while crying on the phone. Entranced by the girl's weeping, she thinks, "The reason she was crying didn't matter to me. Perhaps there was no reason at all. Her tears had that sort of purity."²⁶ Watching with eerie intensity, she feels confident that the girl is capable of making "the finest shortcakes in the world."²⁷ This gaze appears simultaneously protective and invasive, eagerly consuming the grief of the other woman, but what is the connection between "the finest shortcakes in the world" and the tears of a young woman?

In her reading of Ogawa's 2006 novel *Mīna no kōshin* (ミーナの行進, Mena's procession), Eve Zimmerman emphasizes the importance of female friendship in the narrative, noting how, "Ogawa uses a familiar trope from girls' coming-of-age stories: a girl comes to self-knowledge by engaging in a homosocial relationship with another girl."²⁸ Although friendship does not describe the depictions that I discuss, I argue similarly that these relationships—or brief, even trivial encounters—between women can be explained by a desire for self-knowledge, particularly in terms of what it means to be a woman in contemporary Japan. In "Yōgashiya no gogo," the narrator's gaze upon the young bakery employee remains ambivalent, but what is suggested is a female homosocial bond between them through the cake that one makes and the other consumes: a shared connection through this enticing symbol of happiness and love that can also shape-shift into a frightening vessel of rage, a furious attack on the insensitivity of a husband lacking any desire to understand a woman's sorrow. Already lost in her own grief, the narrator also finds it difficult to look away from the other woman's tears, compelled beyond reason by the dark nature of this sweetness lying between them.

Arguably, in writing by women, cakes and other sweet foods are highly fraught, with food studies scholars acknowledging the gendering of sweetness across modern contexts in the form of "a widespread perception, reinforced by advertising and popular culture, that pairs women with sweetness and desserts."²⁹ For example, outlining the feminization of confectionery in nineteenth-century America, Wendy Woloson shows how historical developments led to associations of sweetness with "genteel feminine lives—ornamental, inessential, ephemeral, and easily

dismissed” and women who were “impractical by nature and little able to control their own desires.”³⁰ Concerning literary depictions of women and sweets, David Goldstein suggests, “Perceived links between sweetness and female appetite, coupled with contemporary rhetoric about the dietary perils of sweets, have also led to a strong association between sweetness and guilt, especially for female characters.”³¹

Throughout Ogawa’s early fiction, sweet foods exude discomfort and rage at the imposition of mainstream femininities while acting as spectacles of grotesque delight, within a cultural context where norms of sweetness are particularly pervasive for women. In everyday life in contemporary Japan, flooded with images of sweetness in popular discourses of television, magazine, and advertising culture, sweets can act as an uncomfortable daily imperative to girls and women. Assumed to have an enthusiastic appetite for sugary foods, women are also simultaneously pressured to embody them: to be sweet, inoffensive, decorative, trivial, and defined by senseless pleasure, lacking in “nutrition” or content.

Elsewhere, I have discussed this broader cultural background in terms of representations of sweets in the genre of *shōjo* manga (girls’ comics) that suggest pleasure and self-indulgence, but also a more critical tone, including elements of disgust.³² Arguably, Ogawa draws from this heritage of girls’ culture in her depictions.³³ In her discussion of *shōjo* horror manga, Hiromi Tsuchiya Dollase sets the fear and gore of the subgenre apart from the “flowers, ribbons, and cute imagery” of mainstream *shōjo* manga.³⁴ Similarly, responding to common expectations in girls’ culture, Ogawa’s sweet images skillfully combine horrifying and dainty femininities in her own version of horror that collapses these differences.

Ogawa represents sweetness in terms of conflicted, excessive desire to accompany her representations of women who have given in to extreme emotions and mental instability. These depictions build upon, then transgress conventional femininities by expressing suppressed desire and rage felt by women, occasionally with unexpected outbursts of violence. Significantly, the birthday cake appearing in “Yōgashiya no gogo” is the same as the postwar Japanese “Christmas cake.” In her global history of cake, Nicola Humble comments upon the well-known sexist usage of “Christmas cake” for Japanese women, which—until recently—was applied to “women who remained unmarried after the age of 25...as they had passed their likely use-by date.”³⁵ It is this cake that creates the

tenuous connection between the female narrator and the girl at the bakery, which the narrator also throws in her husband's face in defiance and fury.

In two early works appearing several years before *Kamoku-na shigai*, Ogawa depicts female protagonists surveying other women in everyday settings made grotesque by uncontrollable female bodies and sweetness. Awarded the prestigious Akutagawa Prize for newcomers, Ogawa's 1991 novella "Ninshin karendā" is narrated through the perspective of a young woman watching her older sister undergo the various stages of pregnancy. Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei see the house and home as "symbols of the self, the psyche, and the body," noting in particular that "the identification of the house with the female body gained noticeable momentum in modernity."³⁶ Anticipating the horror of kitchens in *Kamoku-na shigai*, "Ninshin karendā" depicts an ordinary household undergoing unsettling transformations engendered by the erratic desires of the pregnant sister and her unmanageable body.

Written more or less in diary form, with dates and the corresponding week of the sister's pregnancy, Ogawa's work mimics the type of diary a woman keeps to record stages of her own pregnancy in Japan. But in this case, the diary is—somewhat disturbingly—taken over by another woman. Significantly, Takagi Tōru makes clear the constant presence of food in the novella, such that over two-thirds of the twenty-one entries include images of food, and even the remaining entries frequently use food as a metaphor.³⁷ Eventually, the narrative builds to the depiction of irresistible grapefruit jam as a crucial turning point.

From the start of "Ninshin karendā," even ordinary foods appear to be vaguely sinister at breakfast and other meals in the home. Kiwi resembles "little black bugs," and a soft-boiled egg drips with "yellow blood," in a defamiliarizing view of overwhelming sensations that suggests disconcerting life hidden beneath the surface of a pleasant everyday.³⁸ The narrator sells whipped cream at her part-time job, encouraging the customers to bake cakes at home, and in the mornings, the brother-in-law adds so much cream and sugar to his coffee that "the kitchen smells like a bakery at breakfast."³⁹

Without any hints offered concerning other aspects of her life, the narrator remains an enigmatic figure who watches her sister's emotional and bodily upheaval with a lack of emotion. Ogawa portrays the pregnant sister as overly nervous and hysterical, often visiting a psychiatrist. After the start of her morning sickness, everyday foods become even more overtly disgusting. She cries over the odor of eggs, bacon, and other

ordinary items in the household, claiming, “It’s spreading all over the house, like a giant amoeba eating up all the other odors around it, on and on forever” as she expresses her desperate desire for the space of a sterilized hospital room.⁴⁰ In response, the narrator and the brother-in-law clear all food from the house and cook outside in the garden, with the kitchen becoming coldly formal and spotless, erased of any traces of food. Transforming in sync with the kitchen, the narrator’s sister becomes dramatically thin and increasingly beautiful, her body purified and cleansed as she almost stops eating.

Just as quickly, however, the otherworldly calm of the kitchen comes undone once her morning sickness abruptly comes to an end. The narrator watches as her sister greedily begins to consume abnormal quantities of food, her first choice being grotesque, long-expired raisins, which the narrator describes as looking like “mummy’s eyeballs.”⁴¹ Her appetite unleashed, the pregnant sister eats relentlessly from the time she wakes up, with any daily ritual of meals overwhelmed by an excess of food at all times and places. Grotesquely, her body reflects this loss of control by rapidly gaining an enormous amount of weight, gathering “[t]hick, soft fat” and ballooning “like a giant tumor.”⁴² Taken over by the sister’s anxiety and tumultuous bodily shifts—her profound disgust towards food, followed by her insatiable desire—the household spirals out of control along with her.

In *Powers of Horror* (Pouvoirs de l’horreur, 1980), Julia Kristeva famously theorizes the place of food and the female body—with its defiling acts of menstruation and childbirth—in her theory of abjection, described by what is “neither subject nor object” and involving “violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable.”⁴³ This form of intense disgust consumes the domestic spaces of “Ninshin karendā” as both the female narrator and her sister do little to “manage” the home properly, and the brother-in-law remains an innocuous presence on the periphery. Finally, the originally harmless narrator takes on a daily routine in the kitchen culminating in the unseemly spectacle of violence towards a pregnant woman.

Taking home grapefruits from her part-time job, the narrator begins making jam that her pregnant sister consumes eagerly, unable to stop. The routine of jam-making subsumes the kitchen and the narrator’s daily routine, but this seeming act of nurture for her sister has more ominous implications. The narrator vaguely recalls that these American grapefruits

are grown using dangerous pesticides that might destroy human chromosomes, with the “American” nature of the grapefruits possibly acting as Ogawa’s playful jab at postwar Japanese fantasies of the Americanized kitchen. But when her sister asks for more, she agrees in a “flat and expressionless” voice to continue making the jam, then carefully makes sure to select the same grapefruits.⁴⁴

Amanda Seaman views the narrator’s deliberate, repeated act of jam-making as *shōjo* resistance to adulthood, a sort of fairy tale in which “[t]he younger sister-cum-witch leans over her bubbling cauldron, concocting a potion with which to dispatch the pure princess.”⁴⁵ This reading accompanies her analysis of the “*shōjo*” narrator’s “fundamental fear of sexual, emotional, and relational transformation, and her rejection of the social maturity imparted by motherhood.”⁴⁶ But what makes the depiction of the narrator particularly disturbing is the unthinking, unexplained manner in which she proceeds to make the jam. Her seeming lack of agency or clear motivation suggests that murderous intent exists where we least expect it, in overlooked moments and spaces of ordinary life.

In the 2011 volume *Ogawa Yōko ‘kotoba no hyōhon’* (小川洋子の「言葉の標本」, Ogawa Yōko’s word specimens)—a collaboration between Ogawa and artist Fukuzumi Kazuyoshi visualizing her oeuvre—a photograph appears of grapefruits and small mason jars containing scraps of paper with lines such as “Dangerous Imported Food Item!,” laid out on a cheerful red and white checkered tablecloth.⁴⁷ Seen in this light, grapefruit jam suggests a pleasant breakfast, or an attractive treat fitting perfectly into scenes of charming picnics depicted in *shōjo* manga. But in “Ninshin karendā,” the sweetness of the jam indicates alarming desire and hidden malice. Full of jam produced through casually manifesting murderous intent, under the surveillance of the narrator’s unwavering gaze, the sister’s pregnant, consuming body turns into a spectacle of unsettling femininities: sweet and disgusting, out of control with sensations engulfing the household.

Disturbing sweetness and femininities appear again in a scene featuring a monstrous dessert in Ogawa’s novel *Shugā taimu*, albeit in another food-related setting, not a kitchen. Also published in 1991, this novel depicts the runaway appetite of the first-person female narrator herself, a university student named Kaoru going through the spring of her final year before graduation. One of her female friends, another student, succinctly explains the significance of the title by referring to the ending of this “sweet” period of youth as the “sugar time” for their group of

friends.⁴⁸ Resembling the setup of “Ninshin karendā,” a woman’s bodily desires—through the lens of food—organize everyday life in *Shugā taimu*; in an attempt to “manage” her appetite, the narrator records lists of all the foods she has eaten in a diary, with entries appearing at various points in the text.

Echoing the end of “Ninshin karendā,” the first food eaten in the text is apricot jam. Food sometimes appears innocuously in Kaoru’s lists but also emerges in repulsive forms, such as with ugly wax models at the dining hall. Even as she finds herself looking at them greedily, Kaoru cannot ignore the repulsive appearance of “noodles twisted like small intestines and coffee the shade of gastric juices.”⁴⁹ The most spectacular representation of food, however, appears during an incident at her part-time job at a hotel that seems to play a strange role in triggering her bizarre appetite. One afternoon, the head waitress directs Kaoru and the rest of the staff to clean up the banquet hall after a wedding reception. Under the chandeliers, there sits an extravagant “Ice Cream Royale” dessert, which the staff are ordered to help finish eating.

It was a gigantic mass of ice cream on top of the table. I had never before seen so much ice cream in my life. It lay in front of me with an overwhelming weight, density, and coldness. Its surface was covered with merengue, caramelized here and there. It was beginning to fall apart from the bottom, with melted ice cream oozing over the glass platter.⁵⁰

In a classic move by Ogawa, Kaoru views this sweet, gorgeous symbol of marital bliss with disgust, and the “cloudy white lumps” remind her of a department store exhibit on the Auschwitz concentration camp, labeled “Soap made with the fat from Jewish corpses.”⁵¹ Nevertheless, she reluctantly begins to eat the ice cream.

As she does so, she starts to fantasize about the head waitress while watching the other woman consume the ice cream with great enthusiasm, “completely focused, innocent, and valiant, eating more delightedly and with more enjoyment than anyone else.”⁵² With rumors hinting that she comes from an aristocratic family fallen into poverty, the older, unmarried woman drips with overly feminine, sweet language. Indicating gender norms for Japanese women from a past era, her absurdly polite language marks her as a vestige of outmoded femininity. As she eats, she becomes even more grotesque: “Every time she swallowed the ice cream, a muscle on her neck wriggled like a long, narrow insect, and her orange, outdated lipstick glistened with the fat from the melted ice cream.”⁵³ Lost in her imagination, Kaoru is strangely struck by sadness in response to “the

sound of her laughter, her fragile figure, and her overly polite way of speaking.”⁵⁴

Like the huge leftover ice cream dessert, the head waitress herself appears to be a figure of excessive sweetness, the grotesque remainder of fantasies of heteronormative love and happiness. Woloson sees the wedding cake as a dessert that has historically “symbolically reiterated the bride,” such that “the bride and her cake were actually synonymous—a male’s possessions in saccharine form,” and the Ice Cream Royale fulfills a similar role.⁵⁵ While the “sugar time” of the female university students signifies youth, as well as nostalgia, the sweetness of the head waitress has clearly gone bad. Ogawa subtly shows how imperatives of femininity have an expiration date—the older woman continues making earnest attempts at performing conventional femininities with her lipstick and feminine language but turns into a pathetic sight of horror and pity for the younger woman Kaoru.

Similar to the abrupt transformation of the pregnant sister’s appetite in “Ninshin karendā,” Kaoru’s excessive appetite simply stops one day, and she moves on with her life, destroying her diary with its records of food. In his reading of *Shugā taimu*, Ayame Hiroharu suggests that Ogawa’s clumsy explanation of the title was for the benefit of female readers of the women’s magazine *Marie Claire*, in which the novel was serialized.⁵⁶ More generally, he simply sees the novel as a “bittersweet story...of youth, as well as the ending of youth.”⁵⁷ This analysis, however, seems to trivialize Ogawa’s stunning representation of women’s anxieties through the lens of sweetness. Taking up *Shugā taimu* and other fiction by contemporary Japanese women writers, Tomoko Aoyama finds the recurring theme of “fear of food and eating,” in which “food is regarded as something superfluous, addictive, deeply disturbing, even toxic, rather than as something pleasurable and nutritious.”⁵⁸ In *Shugā taimu* and “Ninshin karendā,” Ogawa provides an incisive critique along these lines through female characters’ ambivalent, often unpleasant relationships with their appetites.

But without completely rejecting sweet femininities, the fluctuating responses of Ogawa’s female characters fall in line with philosopher Carolyn Korsmeyer’s argument that “the disgusting and the delicious do not always function as opposites.”⁵⁹ Korsmeyer draws attention to the prominent place of sweet foods among those “that are tasty in small quantities but cloy when one eats too much and reaches surfeit.”⁶⁰ In Lucy Fraser’s reading of Ogawa’s *Otogibanashi no wasuremono* (Lost property

fairy tales, 2006), a collaborative work with illustrator Higami Kumiko, she notes astutely how Ogawa and Higami express in their postfaces a form of reading pleasure articulated as “a girlish delight in tasting, assimilating, and sharing the flavor of candy.”⁶¹ If, in the words of well-known historian of sugar Sidney Mintz, “the taste of sweetness can seem almost timelessly exciting...so intense it can nearly drown our senses,” 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.⁶²

In “Ninshin karendā” and *Shugā taimu*, as well as stories of *Kamoku-na shigai*, a female protagonist’s gaze at another woman is often left ambiguous. Drawn to many different scenes of femininity, these gazes might reflect curiosity or sympathy, or disgust, but often the reader is left with a sense of uncertainty. One of the most explicitly expressed depictions of a woman’s feelings for another woman, however, is found in the form of intense homoerotic attraction in a context framed by murder, in the story “Hakui” in *Kamoku-na shigai*. The story takes place in the laundry room of a hospital, a peculiar merging of the domestic and the sterilized escape imagined by the pregnant sister in “Ninshin karendā.” The first-person narrator of “Hakui” is deeply attracted to her beautiful female colleague, finding her incomparably elegant, competent, and sensuous, even when completing banal office tasks such as licking the flaps of envelopes with a strangely sinister tongue.

As they check dirty lab coats in the laundry room, the colleague goes on a furious, incoherent rant about her male lover, a married doctor working at the same hospital, until she finally announces that she has killed him. At this revelation, the narrator becomes strangely aroused, envisioning the scene in great detail:

I feel a scream rising out of me, but somehow I stop it, hold it back, and instead I calmly imagine the scene: the knife in her pretty hand; the blade slicing into him again and again; skin ripping, blood spurting. But she’s spotless.⁶³

Earlier, the narrator considers the illogical nature of her co-workers who are squeamish about the hospital morgue, pointing to how these women “see people dying all over the hospital, while they type their reports or eat cream puffs in the lounge.”⁶⁴ But “Hakui” is precisely about glorious indulgence in imagining such forms of feminine callousness and cruelty, with a woman’s innocent appetite for sweets merging with darker

illicit desires, even murderous impulses against men. Spellbound as readers, we watch a female narrator herself entranced by the transgressive possibilities of a woman whose charm and beauty hides her terrible capability for violence.

Useless Men, Flawless Boys: The Female Author and Masculinities

Kamoku-na shigai and other early works by Ogawa overflow with a female fascination with improper femininities, found in images of women disregarding boundaries, engaging in illegitimate pleasures, and participating in shocking violence, alongside sweets and other food in everyday life. As suggested earlier, stereotypical “femininity” associated with women involves a lack of logic, excessive emotion, appetite, and other associations with the body. In response, Ogawa presents women demonstrating such “femininity” in grotesquely exaggerated forms in mundane settings, going mad or eating uncontrollably, with unruly bodies. She reworks both abject and idealized femininities through female characters finding themselves unable to look away from women who reflect other possible versions of themselves: hideous witches, innocent crying girls, ludicrous old maids, or jealous mistresses. 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.

If Ogawa writes femininities in terms of grotesque spaces of daily life, what about masculinities in her stories? The significance of her femininities becomes clearer when contrasted with masculinities within her texts. In this section, I focus on heterosexual encounters in *Kamoku-na shigai* and outline her depiction of idealized masculinities that suggest fantasies of escape from the mundane horror and drudgery of everyday life. In particular, I reflect upon Ogawa’s representation of the struggles of a woman writer in *Kamoku-na shigai*, along with her own position as part of a literary heritage of women producing idealized images of boys.

In *Kamoku-na shigai*, average husbands and male lovers appear to be unimpressive and unsupportive towards female characters. The husband of “Yōgashiya no gogo” responds with anger and frustration to his wife’s actions, with no attempt to comprehend her grief. In “Gōmon hakubutsukan e yōkoso,” we find a detailed description of a female narrator’s deep-seated resentment towards a male lover who is similarly uninterested in her feelings or perspective. The narrator, a young female

hairdresser, takes an unhealthy interest in various gory incidents, including the murder of a doctor in the apartment upstairs (“Hakui”). At the start of a weekend date at home with her boyfriend, she talks endlessly about these incidents until he storms out of the apartment in disgust. Presumably, he expected to have a pleasant, relaxing time, but instead finds himself repulsed by her morbid curiosity.

Going out for a walk, the narrator becomes increasingly upset as she reflects upon the unfairness of his response, her anger taking on a collective element as she recalls trivial reasons that her female friends were abandoned by their male lovers. Eventually, she comes across an old mansion with a plaque reading “The Museum of Torture.” She listens closely as an old man explains the use of each torture device laid out in the museum, even as she thinks of the shrimp, wine, and strawberry shortcake laid out for a romantic dinner back at the apartment. Viewing a pair of tweezers used for torture, she imagines tying her boyfriend to the chair on the veranda. Instead of giving him his usual haircut, she pulls out each hair on his head one by one, thinking, “I’ll enjoy that tiny bit of resistance each time I pluck a hair, the feeling of the skin ripping, of fat popping to the surface.”⁶⁵ Her fantasy transforms the setting of a cozy, intimate time spent at home—a home-cooked meal complete with dessert—into a site of torture.

The image of a woman who cannot stop talking, especially about inappropriate things, is highly suggestive in the context of struggles faced by women writers. Providing a historical overview of problems faced by female writers in modern Japan, Rebecca Copeland argues that often, “[t]he very act of self-presentation undermines moderation, modesty, and femininity.”⁶⁶ As seen earlier, Ogawa represents unhinged female desire through depictions of women with excessive appetites and disorderly spectacles of food. But throughout her writing, showing a parallel lack of control, we also find women unable to stop talking, with the narrator of “Gōmon hakubutsukan e yōkoso” resembling the beautiful woman in “Hakui” who cannot stop angrily ranting about her disappointing male lover. Also connected to the mouth, these uncontrollable words suggest the self-consciousness and shame—or unhinged lack of judgment, so to speak—of a woman writer going against the demands of mainstream femininity simply by having a voice.

Ayame observes that husbands and boyfriends in Ogawa’s stories often have little to no presence with rather negative portrayals, specifically because they “represent the ‘side’ of daily life,” grouped with the

unpleasant realities of domestic spaces.⁶⁷ Accordingly, women look instead towards male characters removed from realistic depictions of romantic love or marital relationships in order to find solace. This tendency, along with the struggle of the woman writer, appears with the recurring figure of a female author in *Kamoku-na shigai*: a “girl-housewife-novelist” who eventually becomes mentally ill and finds herself unable to produce more writing before she dies alone.⁶⁸ In the story “Nemuri no sei,” an adult male narrator goes over memories of his long estranged former stepmother—the female author—as he heads to her funeral.

When the two first met, she was a young woman in her twenties working at an art supply store frequented by his father, a middle-school art teacher. He recalls, “Mama was quiet and petite...every feature of her body—neck, fingernails, knees, feet—seemed almost miniature.”⁶⁹ “Mama” possesses a child-like appearance and often seems anxious and insecure. Like other women in Ogawa’s stories, she fails to fulfill her proper role in the kitchen; she mutters incoherently to herself as she prepares dinner, and she writes stories at the dinner table, making the boy promise not to tell his father, a “real artist.”⁷⁰ Infantilized by both her appearance and lack of confidence, she appears extremely vulnerable.

In these recollections, the figure of the husband and father barely appears, and the young stepson seems to be the woman’s sole source of comfort as she goes through the motions of everyday life, troubled by unexplained anxiety and leaking words painfully and inappropriately. On nights when the father works late, she goes to the boy’s room and recites her stories to him, reading for so long that he remembers, “Mama’s lips would get dry and cracked, and her voice would go hoarse...she started to slur her words, and her voice quivered so much I worried she was about to cry.”⁷¹ In the end, he has no idea why she leaves, only recalling, “Toward the end, she talked to herself more and more.... She muttered almost constantly, like a broken record.”⁷²

Taking a look at several of the earliest works by Ogawa makes it easier to recognize the significance of the young stepson in “Nemuri no sei.” Several of Ogawa’s stories from the late 1980s depict idealized images of boys, often described in terms of almost unearthly physical perfection and contrasted with ugly, unpleasant aspects of a female narrator’s life. In Ogawa’s 1989 short story “Daivingu pūru” (ダイビング・プール, “The Diving Pool”), a girl watches enthralled as a boy practices diving at their high school gym. She thrills at his youthful male beauty in the moment

right before he jumps, marveling, “The line of muscle from his ankle to his thigh has the cold elegance of a bronze statue.”⁷³ His physical beauty affects her in a nearly spiritual way, even the sound of his voice producing a strange experience of ecstasy. Thus, the everyday scene of a high school swim practice transforms into the aestheticized site of the female narrator’s voyeurism as the boy Jun moves with the trained grace and precision of an athlete against the backdrop of the pool.⁷⁴

As another example, in the 1989 novella “Kanpeki-na byōshitsu” (完璧な病室, “The flawless sickroom”), the female narrator follows a daily routine of visiting her terminally ill younger brother in the hospital. She almost seems to luxuriate in the tragedy of his impending death—at the height of his youthful beauty—with the setting of his hospital room acting as a particular object of peculiar pleasure. As a precursor to the pregnant sister of “Ninshin karendā,” who wishes to escape from her household to a sterilized hospital room, the narrator is entranced by his hospital room that has “no signs of daily life—no food scraps, no greasy stains, no curtains absorbing dust.”⁷⁵ Cleaned perfectly and punctually everyday by two female hospital workers, the room “sparkles like a fine champagne,” purified of small, ugly signs of change usually unavoidable in daily life.⁷⁶ As he moves closer to death and stops eating, the brother’s own body becomes equally immaculate, so that the narrator observes, “It seemed that my brother’s pale skin became even purer as he rejected food...he became one with the purity of the sickroom.”⁷⁷ With its proximity to death, the hospital room provides only a facade of eternal beauty and order—one built on female labor—but given a respite in this artificially perfect room, the female narrator worships it nonetheless.

This surreal space—centering on the brother and his body—is dramatically contrasted with ordinary households reflecting the disorder and filth of life. Returning home from the hospital, the narrator of “Kanpeki-na byōshitsu” continually feels repulsed by leftover food on the kitchen counter or dirty dishes that her husband piles in the sink. And in recollections of her childhood, her mother’s mental illness takes over and contaminates the entire household.⁷⁸ The link between her disgust and her mother reflects Dollase’s suggestion that “[d]omesticity is a site of horrifying reality and represents both physical and mental confinement for daughters” in works by Japanese women writers.⁷⁹ The mother’s mental disturbance encroaches upon the household as misplaced food such as “cucumbers growing mold on top of the shoe rack and oranges covered in mold inside the washing machine.”⁸⁰ One day, the young narrator even

finds a plate of strawberry shortcake in a flowerbed and glimpses ants eagerly swarming over it, “burying themselves in the soft, cushiony whipped cream.”⁸¹ Along with other images of sweetness in Ogawa’s work, this scene operates as a spellbinding image of “femininity” unraveling in the household. Embodying the mental collapse of the mother—whose failure to run the household acts as the catalyst for the father’s abandonment—the adorable cake turns into a repulsive site of disfigured beauty.

Referring to Ogawa’s more fantastical depictions, literary critic Chiba Shunji suggests that she possesses “unlimited affection for a certain type of perfect, complete world, unable to resist the pull of this intense attraction.”⁸² In my readings, I argue that this tendency can be articulated more clearly in terms of idealized masculinities appearing with boys and young men in her stories, who allow for a removal from the ugly domestic realities of a feminized everyday. Arguably, Ogawa’s depictions become more legible in the context of the genre of boys love (ボーイズラブ; also known as BL), which emerged in 1970s Japan to become a major subgenre of *shōjo* manga. In her overview of women writers connected with this phenomenon, Kazumi Nagaike discusses the roles of Mori Mari (1903–1987), Kōno Taeko (b. 1926–2015), and others in a “discursive process by which male homosexual narratives are stylized as fantasy images,” with a history of female cultural producers (writers, artists) and readers using representations of *bishōnen* (美少年), or beautiful boys, to experience transgressive forms of love excluded from heterosexual narratives.⁸³

While Nagaike does not include Ogawa in her genealogy of BL, Ogawa’s oeuvre displays parallel characteristics of escape through idealized masculinities; her narratives lack depictions of male homoeroticism but return repeatedly to images of perfectly formed boys who inspire wonder and longing in female narrators unable to achieve ideals of purity and unchanging order as they remain mired in spaces of daily life. On the one hand, these youthful male figures are portrayed positively in ways that female characters are not. However, they also remain relatively flat with little interiority, simply serving to support the fantasies of Ogawa and her female protagonists. For example, in *Kamokuna shigai*, in which husbands and male lovers have no interest in listening to women, the young stepson in “Nemuri no sei” pays perfect attention to the female author, sitting close to his stepmother as she writes at the dinner table, then listening to her late into the night. But his only role seems to be to act as a vessel for her storytelling.

In *Kamoku-na shigai*, Ogawa does not fail to comment playfully on the politics of the fetishization of boys in her own stories; arguably, her portrayal of the stepson directly reflects her consideration of this trope. And in “Tomato to mangetsu,” another story in *Kamoku-na shigai*, the girlish novelist appears again, this time seen through the eyes of a middle-aged male journalist. Consumed by paranoia, she lives in fear that her manuscript will be stolen by the “hunchback woman with the glasses”—her strange, mysterious double—and applauds the narrator enthusiastically when he is simply swimming laps in the pool, as Ogawa’s tongue-in-cheek reference to her earlier story “Daivingu pūru.”⁸⁴ In this story, comically performing his role as a fetishized object for the delusional female author, a middle-aged man replaces the perfect, youthful masculine ideal of beauty found in Ogawa’s earlier stories.

With a darker tone, in “Dokusō,” the final story of *Kamoku-na shigai*, an aging female artist selfishly seeks to possess a boyish young composer under the guise of offering him money for his tuition. But in the end, coldly rejected, she stumbles alone onto a slope covered with discarded refrigerators of all shapes and sizes in a silent landscape. She opens the door of one, and we find ourselves back in the first story of the collection, “Yōgashiya no gogo,” viewing a person with “[l]egs neatly folded, head buried between the knees, curled ingeniously to fit between the shelves and the egg box.”⁸⁵ But instead of a dead boy, she finds herself: “In this gloomy, cramped box, I had eaten poison plants and died, hidden away from prying eyes.”⁸⁶

This ending suggests the danger of women writers allowed to follow their own creative impulses but only to reproduce fetishization ignoring the subjectivity or agency of objects of fantasy. In the stories of *Kamoku-na shigai*, a woman’s hands are connected to cooking and murder, but also to acts of creativity, turning storytelling itself into a fearsome, disorderly practice. Besides the recurring female author and the female artist of “Dokusō,” we can note the inspired delusion of the narrator’s annual birthday celebration for her dead son in “Yōgashiya no gogo,” and cooking performed with hand-shaped carrots—chopped off from a murdered husband—signifies frightening acts of women’s writing and creation in “Rōba J.”

Arguably, the subversive aspects of these women balance out the self-centered nature of Ogawa’s fantasies of beautiful boys. Seen as fit only to deal with trivial matters, women exercise creative agency that spills out not only in correct, safe, or predictable ways, but also in disgusting,

horrific directions as they seek to transgress boundaries of kitchens and other private spaces. Allowing for this chaos, or embracing it, might be a questionable choice—a lack of logical consideration, a sign of mental instability—but also one leading to fascinating, if terrifying worlds, developed through anger and violence permeating femininities of daily life.

Conclusion: Tender Intimacy Versus the Ugliness of the Everyday

Negative emotions of grief and anger as well as dangerous desire permeate the pages of *Kamoku-na shigai*, in which mourning goes out of control in the kitchen (“Yōgashiya no gogo”), vegetables take on the form of chopped human body parts (“Rōba J”), a woman worships her murderous female colleague (“Hakui”), everyday objects are utilized as instruments of torture (“Gōmon hakubutsukan e yōkoso”), and a possessive older woman finds her own corpse in a refrigerator (“Dokusō”), along with other dark or ominous occurrences in stories not taken up in this essay. In “Ninshin karendā” and *Shugā taimu*, we find the ambivalent gazes of female protagonists upon other women in disturbing scenes of sweetness, further reflecting the troubled nature of femininities and food in mundane contexts.

To return to the opening of this essay, Ogawa’s 2003 novel *Hakase no ai-shita sūshiki* seems to provide a completely different vision of everyday life, one that retains a gendering of the everyday but depicts the role of women in domestic spaces with a strikingly different tone. Previously a grotesque space, the kitchen and household in *Hakase no ai-shita sūshiki* are the setting for the building of valuable intimacy alongside the elegant performance of everyday tasks. Ogawa’s novel borrows the logic of pure mathematics to describe the nature of intimacy gradually accumulating among its three characters; sometimes inexplicable, yet with hidden forms of perfect order, this love arises within the repetition of an ordinary everyday.

In the spaces of the Professor’s house, the housekeeper’s modest, simple physical labor takes on an almost mystical significance as daily routines lead to tender affection among the three characters in the story. *Hakase no ai-shita sūshiki* lends itself well to projects concerned with rescuing domesticity, such as feminist scholar Susan Fraiman’s efforts to recuperate “inferiorized categories associated with domesticity, all of them coded as ‘feminine’ and subordinated to their opposing ‘masculine’ terms,” including the ordinary, the detailed, the small, and so on.⁸⁷ While

Ogawa's earlier fiction violently challenges the imposition of femininities associated with food and domestic spaces, *Hakase no ai-shita sūshiki* takes a different approach to argue for the worth of denigrated values and categories associated with women instead of asserting the anxieties of women contending with such expectations.

Another way of expressing this shift in Ogawa's writing might be to say that her work moves from exposing perverse, raw aspects of the everyday to meditating upon wonder inherent in the mundane. *Hakase no ai-shita sūshiki* is commonly seen as a turning point for Ogawa, and Ayame implies the superiority of her more recent work when he suggests, "We might view this transformation in terms of maturity."⁸⁸ Nevertheless, I would argue that the strengths of *Hakase no ai-shita sūshiki* and Ogawa's other more recent writing should not result in the dismissal of *Kamoku-na shigai* and other early works discussed here. If we fail to acknowledge the sharp intellect and perception displayed by these stories, we give Ogawa too little credit for her powerful use of revolting and horrific femininities to shock us out of our complacency in the motions of daily life.

Moreover, on Ogawa's success in winning the Akutagawa Prize, Takanezawa comments, "'Ninshin karendā' was the first time in the postwar that a woman in her twenties had won the award, and the winner's occupation as a housewife occasioned even more discussion."⁸⁹ Ogawa has risen to become one of the most well-respected and accomplished writers in the Japanese literary establishment, which might make it easy to forget about the gendered circumstances of her debut as a young woman dealing alternately with labels of "*shōjo* manga" and "housewife." With these circumstances taken into consideration, Ogawa's critique of mainstream femininities in *Kamoku-na shigai* and other works appears all the more worthy of scholarly attention, with broader relevance for our readings of women writers in contemporary Japan.

NOTES

¹ In my essay, I refer to the original Japanese titles of Ogawa's texts. The English title following in parentheses in the first mention refers to the title used for the existing English translation. In cases where an English translation does not exist, the English title is my own translation, and only the first word is capitalized. Similarly, I cite published English translations whenever possible and am responsible for any other translations of passages from Japanese texts used within the essay.

- ² Yoko Ogawa, *The Housekeeper and the Professor*, trans. Stephen Snyder (New York: Picador, 2009), 135.
- ³ Ogawa, *The Housekeeper*, 167.
- ⁴ Noriko Mizuta, “Women’s Self-Representation and Transformation of the Body,” *Josai International Review* 1.1 (1995): 98.
- ⁵ See Yoko Ogawa, *Revenge: Eleven Dark Tales*, trans. Stephen Snyder (New York: Picador, 2013). The literal translation of the Japanese title is “Silent corpses, obscene mourning.”
- ⁶ Naomi Schor, “*Cartes Postales*: Representing Paris 1900,” *Critical Inquiry* 18.2 (1992): 188.
- ⁷ Rita Felski, “The Invention of Everyday Life,” *New Formations* 39 (1999): 17. Additionally, queer theorist Michael Warner provides an insightful overview of problems surrounding private and public spheres in the context of gender. Michael Warner, “Public/Private,” in *Critical Terms for the Study of Gender*, ed. by Catharine R. Stimpson and Gilbert Herdt (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 358–392.
- ⁸ Kanda Noriko, “Ogawa Yōko zenchosaku kaitai,” *Yurika tokushū Ogawa Yōko* (February 2004): 189.
- ⁹ A highly relevant study is Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic*, a classic feminist work on the figure of the “madwoman,” domesticity, confinement, and struggles of Victorian women writers. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979).
- ¹⁰ Jan Bardsley, *Women and Democracy in Cold War Japan* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 42.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 47.
- ¹² Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni, “Consuming Domesticity in Post-Bubble Japan,” in *Consuming Life in Post-Bubble Japan: A Transdisciplinary Perspective*, ed. by Katarzyna J. Cwiertka and Ewa Machotka (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 113.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 114.
- ¹⁴ Ogawa, *Revenge*, 4–5.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ¹⁶ Higashi Masao, “Shūshū no ma, moshiku wa hako onna no yūshū,” *Yurika tokushū Ogawa Yōko* (February 2004): 161.

- ¹⁷ Ogawa, *Revenge*, 28.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, *Revenge*, 31.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, *Revenge*, 33.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, *Revenge*, 29.
- ²² Janice Loreck, *Violent Women in Contemporary Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 143, 152.
- ²³ Higashi, “Shūshū,” 161.
- ²⁴ Raechel Dumas, *The Monstrous-Feminine in Contemporary Japanese Popular Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 103, 119.
- ²⁵ Ogawa, *Revenge*, 6.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.
- ²⁸ Eve Zimmerman, “Angels and Elephants: Historical Allegories in Ogawa Yōko’s *Mīna no kōshin*,” *U.S.-Japan Women’s Journal* 49 (2016): 79.
- ²⁹ Fabio Paresecoli, “Gender,” in *The Oxford Companion to Sugar and Sweets*, ed. by Darra Goldstein (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 296.
- ³⁰ Wendy Woloson, *Refined Tastes: Sugar, Confectionery, and Consumers in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 224.
- ³¹ David Goldstein, “Literature,” in *The Oxford Companion to Sugar and Sweets*, ed. by Darra Goldstein (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 410.
- ³² See Grace En-Yi Ting, “The Desire and Disgust of Sweets: Consuming Femininities through *Shōjo* Manga,” *U.S.-Japan Women’s Journal* 54 (2018): 52–74.
- ³³ In her analysis of sexism surrounding Ogawa’s early reception, Takanezawa Noriko notes comparisons of Ogawa’s work to *shōjo* manga, commenting dryly, “This was definitely not meant as a compliment.” Takanezawa Noriko, “Ogawa Yōko no bungaku no sekai,” in *Ogawa Yōko: Gendai josei sakka dokuhon*, ed. by Takanezawa Noriko (Tokyo: Kanae Shobō, 2005), 11. Elsewhere, she discusses how Ogawa has been grouped with Yoshimoto Banana (b. 1964) and other women writers of the same generation, labeled in terms of *shōjo* manga and then summarily “dismissed on the level of literary scholarship.” Takanezawa Noriko, “Ogawa Yōko ‘Ninshin karendā ron,’” *Bulletin of the Department of Management and Information Science, Jōbu University* 26 (December 2003): 160. I relate Ogawa’s work to *shōjo* manga but without this

form of stigma; instead, I am interested in suggesting the contributions of girls' culture to literary history.

- ³⁴ Hiromi Tsuchiya Dollase, "Shōjo Spirits in Horror Manga," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 38 (2010): 59.
- ³⁵ Nicola Humble, *Cake: A Global History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 78.
- ³⁶ Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei, "Chapter 1: Introduction," in *The Domestic Space Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 8.
- ³⁷ Takagi Tōru, "'Ninshin karendā': shoku no fūkei," in *Ogawa Yōko: Gendai josei sakka dokuhon*, ed. by Takanezawa Noriko (Tokyo: Kanae shobō, 2005), 40. Takagi also notes that the novel only depicts "Western" (*yōfū*) food, going along with Japanese postwar ideals of kitchen defined by modern convenience. See Takagi, "'Ninshin,'" 43.
- ³⁸ Yoko Ogawa, "Pregnancy Diary," in *The Diving Pool: Three Novellas*, trans. Stephen Snyder (New York: Picador, 2008), 64.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 88.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 97.
- ⁴³ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1.
- ⁴⁴ Ogawa, "Pregnancy Diary," 98.
- ⁴⁵ Amanda Seaman, *Writing Pregnancy in Low-Fertility Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017), 45.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.
- ⁴⁷ Ogawa Yōko and Fukuzumi Kazuyoshi. *Ogawa Yōko 'kotoba no hyōhon'* (Tokyo: Bungei shunjū, 2011), 72–73.
- ⁴⁸ Ogawa Yōko, *Shugā taimu* (Tokyo: Chūōkōronsha, 1991), 204.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 18–19.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 21. For more on Ogawa's engagement with the Holocaust, particularly the politics of her well-known interest in Anne Frank, see Zimmerman's essay "Angels and Elephants."
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 21.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 22.

⁵⁵ Woloson, *Refined*, 177, 186.

⁵⁶ Ayame Hiroharu, *Ogawa Yōko: Mienai sekai o mitsumete* (Tokyo: Bensei shuppan, 2009), 32.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 30.

⁵⁸ Tomoko Aoyama, *Reading Food in Modern Japanese Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 187.

⁵⁹ Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 62.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 63.

⁶¹ Lucy Fraser, *The Pleasures of Metamorphosis: Japanese and English Fairy Tale Transformations of 'The Little Mermaid'* (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 2017), Kindle edition, "Chapter 4: Mermaids Repeated, Inverted, and Reversed in Women's Fairy Tale Revisions." She also comments here on her following discussion in the same study of how "candy is a recurring item of girlishness and is used to imagine the way girls might share and absorb stories" in girls' mermaid stories ("Chapter 5: Girls Reading and Retelling 'The Little Mermaid'"). Fraser's readings serve as an instructive complement to my essay in which horror and disgust are highlighted and pleasure arguably plays a secondary role. Also, for other writing on Ogawa and fairy tales, see Mayako Murai, *From Dog Bridegroom to Wolf Girl: Contemporary Japanese Fairy-Tale Adaptations in Conversation with the West* (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 2015).

⁶² Sidney Mintz, "Foreword," in *The Oxford Companion to Sugar and Sweets*, ed. by Darra Goldstein (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), viii.

⁶³ Ogawa, *Revenge*, 58.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 52.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 96.

⁶⁶ Rebecca Copeland, "A Century of Reading Women's Writing in Japan: An Introduction," in *Woman Critiqued: Translated Essays on Japanese Women's Writing* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), 10.

⁶⁷ Ayame, *Ogawa*, 17–18.

⁶⁸ The female author first appears as the first-person female narrator of "Rōba J," before resurfacing in "Nemuri no sei" as the male narrator's stepmother. Her third appearance is in "Tomato to mangetsu" as the eccentric female author appearing at the hotel where the male narrator is staying.

- ⁶⁹ Ogawa, *Revenge*, 41.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 44.
- ⁷² *Ibid.*, 49.
- ⁷³ Yoko Ogawa, “The Diving Pool,” in *The Diving Pool: Three Novellas*, trans. Stephen Snyder (New York: Picador, 2008), 4.
- ⁷⁴ The Chinese character (*kanji*) used for Jun’s name is 純, meaning “pure.” The female narrator is contrasted with the figure of Jun, who is not only physically but also spiritually pure. She feels disgusted and irritated by the other children at her parents’ orphanage and enjoys cruelly teasing a small girl in her charge. At one point, she poisons the girl by feeding her a moldy, expired cream puff.
- ⁷⁵ Ogawa Yōko, *Kanpeki-na byōshitsu* (Chūōkōron shinsha, 2004), 31.
- ⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.
- ⁷⁷ Ogawa, *Kanpeki*, 35.
- ⁷⁸ One symptom of the mother’s unnamed mental illness is that she cannot stop talking, until one day she is held hostage and killed by the criminal, who cannot stand her incessant, mindless chatter.
- ⁷⁹ Dollase, “*Shōjo* Spirits,” 65.
- ⁸⁰ Ogawa, *Kanpeki*, 34.
- ⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 46.
- ⁸² Chiba Shunji, “Kanpeki-na nikutai/fuhai surushintai: ‘daivingu pūru o megutte,’” in *Ogawa Yōko: Gendai josei sakka dokuhon*, ed. by Takanezawa Noriko (Tokyo: Kanae Shobō, 2005), 28.
- ⁸³ Kazumi Nagaïke, *Fantasies of Cross-Dressing: Japanese Women Write Male-Male Erotica* (Boston: Brill), 5. As broader context for Nagaïke’s work, film theorist Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) is a classic text known for its argument concerning the “male gaze,” or how on-screen women are commonly constructed in order to provide pleasure for voyeuristic male viewers. Building on Mulvey’s work, Julia Bullock has discussed representations of what she calls the “masculine gaze” in fiction by Japanese women writers from the 1960s and 1970s showing “a female protagonist who finds herself subjected to a disciplinary gaze that is invasive and even violent.” Julia Bullock, *The Other Women’s Lib: Gender and Body in Japanese Women’s Fiction* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2010), 56. On the other hand, scholars such as Nagaïke in Japanese studies have touched upon the “female gaze,” particularly in relation to female authors and readers

of BL. Nagaïke suggests the “subversive possibilities” of the female gaze in this context but also views it as “an unbalanced and precarious position.” Nagaïke, *Fantasies*, 211.

⁸⁴ Ogawa, *Revenge*, 147.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁸⁷ Susan Fraiman, *Extreme Domesticity: A View from the Margins* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 17.

⁸⁸ Ayame, *Ogawa*, ii.

⁸⁹ Takanezawa, “Ogawa Yōko no bungaku no sekai,” 9.