Renegotiating Normalcy: Gender and Marginality in the Fiction and Film of Recessional Japan

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the various ways economic stagnation has challenged normative gender roles in contemporary Japan. Since the beginning of Japan’s prolonged recession, individuals living lives that do not correspond to the standards of mainstream society have faced increased scrutiny in the mainstream media and popular discourse. Such individuals are often categorized as new phenomena and labeled with terms that emphasize their failure to adhere to economically productive models of selfhood. In order to challenge such categorizations, this paper focuses on contemporary, fictive representations of social nonconformity, while drawing parallels with earlier texts that articulate many of the same problems. The goal of this paper is to demonstrate how marginalization of large segments of the population destabilizes the supposedly universal tenets of capitalist modernity and allows for the production of less rigid models of normalcy.
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Introduction

In the real world there was no such thing as Mister Clean and Miss Clean. They only exist on TV.
-Murakami Haruki, “A Folklore for My Generation”

In the epilogue to Miyoshi Masao’s seminal 1991 text *Off Center: Power and Culture Relations Between Japan and the United States*, the author laments the loss of counter-cultural writing in literature of the 1980s. He singles out Murakami Haruki along with writers like Yoshimoto Banana and Tanaka Yasuo as examples of a literary trend that replaces substance with style. According to Miyoshi, Murakami’s work resists deep analysis, disguises inanity with affective prose, and is quickly forgotten after it is read (235). This analysis of Murakami’s early work is not unfounded, but Miyoshi’s text, published during the onset of the asset bubble burst, lacks the historical hindsight provided by an economic slump that would dominate the cultural consciousness of Japan for the following two decades. Socioeconomic ideals crystallized by years of prosperity gradually lost their lustre under the stresses of a prolonged recession. Accordingly, writers like Murakami and Yoshimoto, who articulated the emptiness of rampant consumer culture in the 1980s, became the progenitors of a literary movement that presented discomfort with prescribed and assumed truths about Japanese identity. The emptiness to which Miyoshi objects, therefore, is characteristic of a prevailing anxiety that two decades of financial instability only intensified.

In blustery, apocalyptic accounts like John Nathan’s *Japan Unbound: A Volatile Nation’s Quest for Pride and Purpose*, foreign writers paint the young inhabitants of post-bubble Japan as a “lost generation,” struggling to survive in the harsh realities created by an economy in decline. To some degree, these depictions are accurate; the far-reaching effects of the recession have challenged accepted social norms and forced deeper consideration of traditional and adopted
cultural ideals. These depictions, however, fail to take into account the fact that isolation, alienation, and uncertainty were already characteristic experiences for many Japanese citizens long before the beginning of the 1990s. Several of Japan’s most prominent authors, many writing at the height of the “economic miracle,” crafted stories that destabilized the idealistic rhetoric of economic prosperity. These narratives challenge the notion of a harmonious and unified postwar zeitgeist and presaged the “lost decade” (Goto-Jones 140) not by forecasting an imminent financial disaster, but by identifying the precarious social problems that were already built into modern Japanese society.

As Karatani Kojin illustrates in his book *Nihon kindai bungaku no kigen* (1980; trans. Origins of Modern Japanese Literature, 1993) the literary preoccupation with many of these social problems has its root in the origins of modern Japanese literature itself. Karatani rejects the notion that subjectivity, as conceived of from its origins in European philosophy, is innate and historicizes the concept by deconstructing seemingly universal notions as wide-ranging as childhood and sickness. Karatani suggests the very notion of a “self” is the product of Japanese interactions with modernity: “Academic historians of modern literature write of the ‘modern self’ as if it were something that existed purely within the mind. But certain conditions are necessary for the production of this ‘self’” (38). Literature provided individuals with a forum in which they could construct a subjective self. This subjectivity was then accepted as an essential part of the modern experience, and through its narration, writers rendered modernity one of the chief subjects of Japanese literature at the turn of the twentieth century. Although Karatani’s book deals primarily with texts from the Meiji era, more precisely the period from 1889 through to 1910, his argument is applicable to much of the subsequent century of writing that followed. The context of the writing changed, but the narration continued to comprise a discussion about the Japanese experience of modernity. Authors like Natsume Sōseki, Dazai Osamu, Mishima Yukio,
and Ōe Kenzaburō were all part of this shared project, writing narratives that explored the role of the individual within the larger social structures of modern Japan and often suggesting that the two were at odds. Like Miyoshi, Karatani suggests that modern literature ended in the 1980s:

In Japan, in the 1980s modern literature seems to have died once and for all. All of the concepts which had been dominant until that time – those of “inner self,” of “meaning,” of “the writer” and of “depth” – were rejected, while language, which had been subordinated to them, was set free. Another way of describing this might be as the reinstatement of various genres – wordplay, pastiche, romance (including science fiction), satire – which had been excluded from modern literature. (187)

Karatani seems to agree with Miyoshi that by the 1980s Japanese literature has broken away from modernity and entered a postmodern epoch, but instead of criticizing this move, as Miyoshi does, he identifies the shift as a paradigmatic one away from the supposedly essential modern experiences and towards a new self, less burdened by the language of modernity. This should not, however, suggest that society itself had broken with modernity altogether. As this paper will show, modernity continued to supply the norms and standards that shaped the lives of many Japanese citizens and a number of authors portrayed this reality, even though the manner in which they articulated it had changed.

Fiction in the two decades bracketing the millennium reflects a growing awareness of the effects of capitalist modernity. This awareness started in the 1980s, but it came into clearer focus in the 1990s and 2000s. Herbert Marcuse remarks on the possibility of such awareness in his 1964 book *The One Dimensional Man*. According to Marcuse, as capitalism progresses, human beings become solely driven by consumption and internalize the needs of the economy. They cannot attain what Marcuse terms “liberation” from this system of consumption, because they
remain unaware of the manner in which this political structure functions: “All liberation depends on the consciousness of servitude, and the emergence of this consciousness is always hampered by the predominance of needs and satisfactions which, to a great extent, have become the individual’s own” (7). This process of adopting the needs of capitalism as one’s own can be seen in the consumer driven society produced by three decades of economic growth in Japan. The failure of the economic system resulted in further awareness of the detrimental effects of ingrained capitalist values, but instead of liberating the population from “servitude,” as Marcuse suggests, consciousness only alienated and isolated individuals.

During the nineties, a number of new social categories were reported and adopted by the mass media and the public. These new categories undermined the notion of collectivism which had dominated Orientalist and Orientalizing characterizations of Japan for more than a century. As I’ve already suggested, the stereotypical image of a harmonious Japanese society had long been contested by accounts of discord and alienation, but these new social phenomena further destabilized the security of an idealized and homogenous Japanese society. Terms like sōshoku danshi (trans. herbivorous men) and hikikomori (socially withdrawn individuals) featured prominently in television shows, news stories, and non-fiction texts and quickly gained acceptance in the vernacular. These phenomena have often been cited as both a result of Japan’s economic condition as well as a cause. In this way, they suggest an awareness of the detrimental effects of capitalism, but rather than leading to Marcuse’s promised “liberation,” awareness has only caused the afflicted individual to be singled out and categorized as apart from the mainstream culture.

As Japanese literature began to reflect this perceived lack of social cohesion, it started to sell exceedingly well both domestically and abroad. Perhaps the most famous example of this trend is one of the writers that Miyoshi criticizes most harshly, Murakami Haruki. Murakami has
earned a sizable fan base for his typically surreal stories that often feature slacker types hanging around the margins of society. Several of his stories hint at the social realities of contemporary Japan, but none more overtly than his short story “Warera no jidai no fōkuroa – kōdo shihonshugi zenshi” (1989; trans. “A Folklore for My Generation: A Prehistory of Late-Stage Capitalism,” 2006).

Written a few years before the collapse of the economy, it shares the story of two inseparable high school sweethearts. The narrative is told from the perspective of a third party, a former high school acquaintance who accidentally runs into the boyfriend years after they both graduated. The boyfriend, now separated from his girlfriend, denies the narrator’s assertion that they were a perfect couple, and begins to tell his story. The boyfriend explains that the girl refused to participate in sexual intercourse and insisted that she save herself for marriage. When the boyfriend offered to marry her, she refused and explained that he did not fit her ideal model of husband. Instead, she argued, she must marry a slightly older and financially stable individual. In other words, her marriage needed to conform to the accepted social model of marriage. The girlfriend professed her love for her partner, but this love could only be a shelter from the “real world” (75). Before their relationship ended, however, she did promise her boyfriend that she would have an affair with him after she got married.

In Murakami’s story, the protagonist and his girlfriend are subsumed by capitalism, and their mutual love is unrealizable because of the prescribed social conditions that have caused the woman to internalize the capitalist need to produce normative families, in which the division of labour is dictated by the needs of the economy. The woman argues that men do not mature as quickly as women, which seems to suggest a belief that her boyfriend will be unable to act responsibly, and, perhaps, will be unable to support their prospective family. Although love is resistant to capitalist conversion, it can only be a temporary respite.5 Murakami’s narrator
concludes with a meditation on his reason for sharing the story: “As I said at the beginning, there’s no real or moral lesson to be learned from this. But this is something that actually happened to [my friend]. Something that happened to all of us. That’s why when he told me his story, I couldn’t laugh. And I still can’t” (83). Murakami’s story points to a generational loss of innocence that is bound to the perpetuation of a particular socioeconomic model. His narrator does not moralize the story, because to do so would require him to occupy a position outside of this purportedly universal narrative. The tragedy of the story is that there is no outside to the totalizing system that prevents the consummation of the couple’s love, but the ending is also significant because of its tone of resignation. The protagonist is ultimately unable or unwilling to challenge the homogenous relational norms offered by late-stage capitalism, but he greets the situation with passivity. Ultimately, he chooses not to consummate the relationship and instead holds his former girlfriend for an hour before leaving and visiting a prostitute for the first time in his life.

The choice reveals that, despite the appearance he gives off at the beginning of the story of being a popular and perfect alpha-male, the main character is characteristic of the more sensitive Murakami protagonists that Chikako Nihei identifies as “herbivorous men” in her essay “Resistance and Negotiation: ‘Herbivorous Men’ and Murakami Haruki’s Gender and Political Ambiguity.” According to Nihei, Murakami’s protagonists are placed in opposition to more engaged and aggressive models of masculinity:

[T]he herbivores and Murakami Haruki suggest a new way of interacting with society. Their careful distancing from and engagement with society, without full dependency or absolute resistance, allow them to perform their individuality; and this is something the contemporary Japanese audience seems to respect and support. (75)
The protagonist of “A Folklore for My Generation,” though too old to belong to the generation Nihei writes about, exemplifies the characteristic negotiation of expected gender roles. It would be inaccurate to suggest that his experience is affirmative, but he demonstrates his ability to resist normative constructions of masculinity. By not consummating the relationship, he does not conform to a sexually aggressive model of manhood. He presents an altogether different model of male identity crafted by the forced acceptance of certain social realities, and, the impossibility of fully escaping the totality of capitalist ideology in the late 1980s, when individuals like him were made aware of their own lack of agency but were still unable to resist it directly. Instead, the protagonist obtains his long sought after physical intimacy by holding his former girlfriend in the same way as when they were teenagers. The action is an acceptance of the impossibility of their relationship but, because it is a kind of retreat into the past, it is also a rejection of their present circumstances.

The protagonist’s forging of an alternative to the choices presented by capitalist modernity is indicative of the kind of narrative that would only become more pervasive as the economic boom of the 1980s gave way to the recessionary period of the 1990s and 2000s. The difficult economic situations facing individuals forced them to find new sustainable models of living: fulltime employees found themselves with more time to spend at home, housewives were forced to enter the labour market, and individuals who could no longer find lifetime employment positions were forced to take part-time or contract work. The narratives I discuss in this thesis reflect these changes, and as with the Murakami’s protagonist, whose sensitive nature leads him away from performing a normative male sexual role, the characters from these stories are re-gendered through their attempts to find an alternative to their inherited or chosen social positions. I will, therefore, explore the construction of gender in recessional Japan and how its
production relates to earlier narratives, where deviation from expected social roles is also shown to affect and alter notions of male and female identity.

In the introduction to the 1989 collection of essays entitled *Postmodernism and Japan* Miyoshi Masao and Harry Harootunian suggest postmodernity was an easy fit for Japan, because the country historically did not correspond to Western notions of “succession and progression” (xvii). According to Miyoshi and Haratoonian, however, the transition into postmodernity that began in the 1980s should not suggest that cultural discourse entirely escaped the problems of modernity. Instead, the writers suggest, understanding the postmodern period requires knowledge of how modernity continues to shape contemporary Japan (xvii). This is difficult to contest. For even if we acknowledge the failures of modernization theory to account for anything other than notions of Western normativity and progression, the effects of modernization as a construct – urbanization, teleological progression, and the encroachment of capitalism into every corner of life – persist. It is these norms, with which the narratives I deal with are concerned, and I explore how, even in the postmodern era, deviating from these standards is a sufficient cause to label individuals as other.

Although I have delineated the terms modern and postmodern as they relate to a cultural consciousness that helped shape a form of Japanese literature emerging in the 1980s, I am less interested in issues of modernity and postmodernity conceptually, than in the ways contemporary literature performs anxieties about seemingly uncontestable cultural values and reflects the paradoxical desire for and ambivalence towards normalcy. This change in cultural consciousness has exposed holes in the values that continue to shape the subjectivity of individuals. The understanding that the foundation of these values is not entirely tenable renders the entire social order precarious. Threats to social cohesion are no longer simply external ones; the core itself – the nation, the family, one’s own subjectivity – has become increasingly unstable.
In this thesis, I analyze several texts which portray profound isolation, psychic uncertainty, and physical danger, and examine how attempts to deal with these anxieties often necessitate the performance of gender roles outside of those prescribed by mainstream culture. Most of the chapters address two narratives – one contemporary work and one written prior to the asset bubble. By doing this, I hope to show how methods of addressing similar cultural and societal concerns have changed since the 1980s. Rather than attempt a comprehensive survey, the narratives in this thesis were selected because they identify different sites of social unrest, where the existing socioeconomic system failed to account for difference.

The majority of texts addressed in this thesis will feature urban settings, not in an attempt to fall back on the forced dichotomy of urban space as modern and rural space as traditional, but because urbanization is the lived reality for the vast majority of citizens in contemporary Japan, and literature with urban settings provides the most obvious examples of the social and economic changes I identify.

My analysis begins in Chapter 1 with a discussion of Natsuo Kirino’s *Out* (1997; trans. *Out*, 2005), in which I examine the gender roles performed by marginal individuals in contemporary Japan. The novel centres on four women, whose participation in concealing the corpse of their co-worker’s murdered husband leads to a new business dismembering bodies. I trace how the feminine body is mechanized in Kirino’s text and how violence and violent sexuality become means of acting out against the marginalization such mechanization engenders. I then compare the text to Abe Kōbō’s *Mikkai* (1977; trans. *Secret Rendezvous*, 1980), which shares a concern with the degradation of the human body and gender relations in modern Japan. By comparing these two books, I attempt to demonstrate that the socioeconomic conditions of contemporary Japan have further eroded the already unsatisfactory gender conceits identified by Abe, rendering them routine and necessitating a violent reaction from those who wish to escape.
In Chapter 2, I continue my analysis of shifting gender roles by looking at the category of *hikikomori* and how these reclusive individuals are feminized through their exclusion from capitalist production. I look at Takimoto Tatsuhiko’s text *N.H.K. ni Yōkoso!* (2002; trans. *Welcome to the N.H.K.*, 2007) in which a young individual who self-identifies as a *hikikomori* narrates his attempts to escape from his reclusive life-style. I examine how the condition is presented in the book as well as how it is articulated and explicated by the psychologist Saitō Tamaki, who first coined the term. I then compare it to literary depictions of similar social categories like *kōtō yūmin* (trans. “high class idlers”) in Natsume Šōzō’s *Sorekara* (1909; trans. *And Then*, 1972) and *hikagemono* (a person in shadows) in Dazai Osamu’s *Ningen shikkaku* (1948; trans. *No Longer Human*, 1956). Although I intend to explain how the depiction of *hikikomori* has precedent in earlier phases of modernity, I suggest that this new categorization has far more potential to destabilize normative social constructions of gender.

Finally, in Chapter 3 I extend my discussion outside of the novelistic form to a recent film – the 2013 movie *Soshite chichi ni naru* (trans. *Like Father Like Son*) by Koreeda Hirokazu. I look at how the movie, in which two families discover that their sons were switched at birth, advocates a less rigid model of fatherhood than the one crafted by the demands of capitalist modernity. This narrative has much in common with Ōe Kenzaburo’s *Kojinteki na taiken* (1964; trans. *A Personal Matter*, 1968), and I trace the overlapping themes of paternal responsibility and heterogeneity within the supposedly homogenous family unit. I argue that disavowing the symbolic importance of blood in *Like Father Like Son* suggests the need to reject modernity’s formation of family in which men and women are separated into productive and reproductive realms.

My approach is by no means systematic, but I hope to provide an inclusive account of some common trends in the literary landscape of contemporary Japan. Although I will attempt to
historicize these books in the period in which they were written, my focus will be on the narratives themselves and how the texts embody the image of social change in contemporary urban space. Therefore, I examine journalistic and historical texts primarily to offer context and read them against the fictional works with which I am engaging. I will also tease out relevant information on texts about Japanese modernity and postmodernity, but my primary critical approach will consist of close textual analysis informed by several theoretical texts by writers like Amanda Seaman, Thomas LaMarre, and Stephen Snyder. My hope is that the different critical approaches used in this paper provide me with a more extensive understanding of contemporary Japanese literature and the period to which it belongs.

In this thesis, I propose that Japanese literature from the 1980s onwards performs the final realization of a history of isolation and alienation tied to anxiety over capitalist modernity. Ultimately, I argue that the economic and social instability of recessionary Japan erodes both physical and psychic security of long-dominant social roles. These works may not destabilize the existing social order, but by expressing the realities of that system’s failure, they provide a locus of opposition that is host to a number of alternative normalcies.

\[\text{Footnotes}\]

1 The enduring popularity of Murakami’s stories suggests that they are not quite as forgettable as Miyoshi predicted. Even Murakami’s two earliest novels, Kaze no uta o kike (1979; trans. Hear the Wind Sing, 1987) and 1973nen no pinbōru (1980; trans. Pinball, 1973, 1985), written and published before the start of the author’s commercial success in the mid-1980s, have been reprinted numerous times in Japan. Hear the Wind Sing was printed 62 times between 1982 and 2001, while Pinball, 1973 was printed 48 times between 1983 and 2000.

2 Editions of Karatani’s book are noticeably different from each other. The version consulted in this paper is the 1993 English translation published by Duke University Press.

3 This term is also typically translated as “herbivore men” (Otagaki) but I have adopted the term “herbivorous men” as used in publications like Nihei’s essay on Murakami (62).
These accounts are not limited to the domestic press, either. An article in Reuters, for example, exemplifies the conflation of social alterity and economic precarity in an article about herbivorous men entitled “Japan’s ‘Herbivore Men’ Shun Corporate Life, Sex.” The writer claims that the non-competitive nature of herbivorous men is a result of “experiencing tough times,” but she also cites a columnist who indicates that their lack of self-confidence also perpetuates the poor economy: “‘In the bubble era, whatever led to consumption was good and people measured their worth by money,’ Fukasawa said. ‘But herbivorous men don’t buy things to show off’” (Otagaki).

I don’t mean to suggest that such phenomena are unique to Japan. During the global recession that occurred in 2008 several other countries have begun to deal with similar problems and categories like *hikikomori* are now recognized in countries like Italy and Spain (Saitō 6). In Japan, however, these phenomena have been recognized for a longer period of time and anxiety over them has been sharpened by a prolonged downturn that has lasted more than two decades.

This is not to privilege the heteronormative construction of romantic love as itself ahistorical. As Michiko Suzuki argues in her 2010 book *Becoming Modern Women: Love and Female Identity in Prewar Japanese Literature and Culture* romantic love only became enshrined as a universal and normative experience during the early part of the twentieth century: “Heterosexual romantic love in particular quickly became valued, in secular terms, as a necessary experience for the modern Japanese self. The nation and its people were to progress not only through modernization in the public sphere but also in their private emotions and personal experiences” (3). Nevertheless, Murakami’s story suggests that whatever sincere emotions exist between the two characters, they are secondary to the production of normative models of family.

The text was first published in 1989 and likely written during the height of the economic boom, suggesting that the sensitive male persona, which Nihei identifies as typical of Murakami’s work, would likely be an unfamiliar trope to readers at the time. Though such individuals would come to be identified as “herbivorous men” in the 2000s, when an article in *Nikkei Business* first coined the phrase (Fukazawa), the short story suggests that this label did not identify a wholly new phenomenon.

This translation is supplied by William Ridgway in his 1998 essay “Natsume Soseki and Male Identity Crisis” (84).
Chapter 1
Mechanization, Violence, and the Body in *Out*

*One measure of a civilization, in fact, is the percentage of misfits in its society.*
-Abe Kōbō, *Secret Rendezvous*

Kirino Natsuo was part of a wave of female writers who excelled in the detective and crime genres in the 1990s and 2000s, and her novel *Out* is her most iconic work. Set in the suburbs of Tokyo, the novel focuses on a group of female factory workers whose financial and personal desperation forces them into a life of crime. Of the book’s four lead characters, the central protagonist Masako undergoes the most dramatic transformation. Starting off as an unsatisfied wife and mother, she eventually ends up starting a lucrative business dismembering corpses. By doing so, she gradually attains financial independence and a degree of autonomy, but in the final few chapters of the novel, these sources of empowerment are endangered when she is raped and threatened with murder.

Thematically, the book has much in common with Abe Kōbō’s *Secret Rendezvous*, a novel that also explores the tension between gendered violence and bodily autonomy. In Abe’s book the protagonist tries to locate his wife in a massive labyrinthine hospital after she is mysteriously taken away by an ambulance one morning. His exploration drives him into confrontation with a number of bizarre experiments that automate and mechanize bodily functions and emphasize the female body as a sexual object. For Abe, the mechanization of the human body provides the final impetus for the protagonist’s retreat from the world, but in Kirino’s book it is already an accepted norm when the narrative begins, a reversal which signals the shifting realities of the female body in recessional Japan. *Out* articulates a perverse normalcy in which violence and labour are interchangeable and the boundary between submission and retaliation is no longer clear.
The mundane lives of Kirino’s four primary characters are economically precarious. Yoshie and Kuniko are the sole breadwinners in their household and Yayoi and Masako must put their earnings towards their family’s expenses. Despite this, their private lives afford them little comfort: Yoshie is a widow raising a teenager and taking care of her bedridden mother-in-law alone; Kuniko is facing an extremely large debt as a result of her partner leaving with the couple’s savings and an apparent inability to refrain from consuming brand-name goods; and the protagonist Masako is equally estranged from her husband and son— a young man who is out of school but refuses to get a full-time job or even communicate with his family. It is the fourth and youngest woman, Yayoi, who finds her situation most unbearable and murders her abusive husband after he admits to gambling away the family savings. Although shocked to learn about Yayoi’s actions, the other women decide to band together and dispose of Yayoi’s husband by dismembering his body. When one of the women fails to dispose of her portion of the body correctly, the police take notice and begin an investigation, and although they successfully manage to elude the police, they attract the attention of a local loan shark named Jumonji, who presents Masako with the opportunity to start a new business disposing bodies. Yoshie joins Masako and together and the women discover that this new job provides them with the financial autonomy their labour at the factory did not, alleviating their desperation and even allowing them the opportunity to purchase the desired goods that were previously unattainable. While the women’s new work changes their situation, it also attracts the attention of a man named Satake, who has become the primary suspect for the murder of Yayoi’s husband. A former convicted criminal, Satake owns a casino and a private club, essentially acting as a pimp for young women, particularly those from overseas. Despite his seemingly calm exterior, he is responsible for the rape and murder of a woman several years earlier, and although he initially seeks to confirm his suspicions about Masako’s role in the murder of Yayoi’s husband, something about the
protagonist triggers his old impulse and he starts formulating a plan to turn her into his next victim. He first puts a stop to her business by killing Kuniko and subsequently confronts Masako at the factory just prior to her planned escape from the country. In one of the abandoned buildings he begins to rape her, but before he can kill the protagonist, she manages to free herself and instead kills him. Perversely, Masako’s actions fill her with regret, but as she leaves the factory she reflects on her decision to leave the country and start a new life.

*Out’s* narrative action is brought about by the desperate economic situations that all four women face. Their precarious lives have forced them to work the graveyard shift at the food factory to make ends meet, and this same precarity leads them towards their criminal actions. The women face a desperation that hints at the economic uncertainty of Japan in the late 1990s and 2000s. The prolonged recession radically reshaped the Japanese workplace and by extension the home. In the nineties, permanent salaried positions began to be replaced by temporary or part-time employees, who were typically paid lower wages and could be hired and fired with far more flexibility on the part of companies dealing with the strain of a poor economy. This phenomenon continued to grow as the recession persisted, and according to employment records, the number of non-permanent and part-time employees, who made up 20% percent of the work force in 1985 gradually rose to 34% by the end of the 2000s (Takeuchi-Okuno 111). Women in particular shouldered the burden of much of this labour, and while the number of men working under fixed term contracts grew from 4% to 8% percent during the 2000s, the percentage of women engaged in the same kind of “non-regular” work grew from 15% in 2001 to 21% by 2007 (Nishitakitan 442). The study that reported these results also goes on to suggest that non-regular work is responsible for endangering the health of the women who perform it. As of 2007, over a third of women engaged in fixed term employment received consultation for health problems and 27% reported subjective symptoms of some kind of health affliction (Nishitakitan 442). The
study concludes that the conditions of non-regular work are particularly poor compared to those of regular salaried employees, and a number of other factors like financial anxiety and social disparity contribute to detrimental health effects of such labour. These results suggest that non-regular work does physical damage to those who perform it and contributes to rather than alleviates the problems facing individuals living an economically precarious existence. Kirino’s narrative reflects this reality and depicts the factory as a site of mental and physical hardship.

The overwhelming majority of workers are women, dictated to by male supervisors who monitor them, force them to wear uniforms, and carefully inspect their clothes. The factory strips away the women’s individuality and reduces them to bodies engaged in repetitive, mechanical actions that afford each worker a single task:

Beyond Yoshie was a long line of workers: one to even out the rice, one to add the curry sauce, one to slice the deep-fried chicken, another to lay it on top of the curry . . . Each meal made its way down the line, assembled in so many small increments, until at last a curry lunch was complete . . . They had to take turns going to the bathroom, one at a time, with a replacement filling in on the line. You had to announce that you wanted to go and then wait your turn, which sometimes took as long as two hours in coming. (10)

As the passage suggests, the factory’s control over each woman’s body is total, and the mechanical demands of the job have a dehumanizing effect on them, requiring them to transcend their biological needs and submit to the physical needs of their work. This is not to suggest that the work is wholly unsatisfying. For example, the women do receive a higher wage than daytime workers at the same job, but this is a small comfort that does not negate the fact that the working conditions the four women face are oppressive. Masako reflects on the damage this work has produced on her body towards the end of the text:
She stared at her fingernails, kept short for the past two years for the factory. Her hands were chapped from the constant soaking in disinfectants. She thought about her twenty years at the credit union, about giving birth to a son and making a home for her family. What had it all meant? In the end, she was no more or less than the reality of all those years, with all the marks they’d left on her. (400)

Here Masako’s life is reducible to the physical effects of her gendered labour. Significantly, it is not only the factory work that has left its mark on Masako’s body; her life and labour at home is also evoked. For the protagonist and the other three women, the work they must perform in the domestic sphere also requires them to relinquish autonomy. Yayoi and Masako devote their time outside of the factory to unsatisfying domestic work, and Yoshie’s situation is particularly harsh, requiring her to act as the primary breadwinner in her family while continuing to perform her role as caregiver to her mother-in-law. Kuniko, the only woman free of such labour, faces even more dire financial circumstances as a result of her single income, which is at odds with her extravagant tastes. The women’s private lives and public labour are dictated by routines and responsibilities that restrict their freedom, and it is not until Yayoi murders her husband, that escape from this oppressive situation becomes possible. By dissembling first the body of Yayoi’s husband and then the bodies supplied to them through Masako’s contact in the underworld, Yoshie and Masako are able to reassert control over their own lives. Although the gruesome nature of the work initially induces nausea, its transgressive nature also empowers the women who perform it. It transforms the skills they have learned through their factory work into criminal actions, outside the confines of acceptable behaviour. Society has legitimized their own subjection, but they are able to reject that control while simultaneously alleviating their own financial burdens. In fact, once they are able to suppress their disgust, they realize that their new work and old work are nearly identical: “there was really very little difference between this job
and the one they did at the factory” (368). The difference is that the women have taken back control over their own bodies. For three of the four women, however, this liberation is limited. Yayoi and Yoshie remain bound to caregiving for their dependents, and Kuniko loses her life, but for Masako the experience is empowering. Masako was once employed at an office in downtown Tokyo until she was fired for requesting a raise to bring her salary up to the same level as her male colleagues. Through her new business, she is finally able to claim the economic power that was denied to her and gradually retakes control over her life in the public and private spheres. Yet, even in Masako’s case, freedom is only attainable after she confronts the man who plans to rape and kill her.

Amanda C. Seaman analyzes this final scene in her essay “Inside Out: Space, Gender, and Power in Kirino Natsuo.” Seaman argues that Out presents an image of the contemporary Japanese city as a gendered space that forces women to live on the literal and figurative margins. She writes that the characters are divided by part-time work and family life, but rather than offering the possibility of challenging this social problem, Kirino only presents the possibility of escape. According to Seaman, Masako has alternated between a feminized marginality at home and work and a degree of autonomous power through her new job dissecting bodies. Seaman, however, suggests that the final rape scene, in which she is bound to the conveyor belt, threatens to re-gender Masako: “[Satake] literally ‘puts her in her place’ – that of food and production, rather than money and commerce” (212). Here she touches on the thematic importance of food production in the text, but the conflation of sexual domination and the production of food also reflects the novel’s insistence on the importance of food production as a gendered role and the accordant power that comes from controlling its production and consumption.

Kirino’s concern with the relationship between food and power is evidenced by women’s insistence on seeking out lunch boxes produced by their factory, suggesting a desire to play the
role of both consumer and producer. After Masako begins her new business, however, producing food, particularly for her family becomes distasteful. Upon a visit to the supermarket, Masako reflects on her growing disinterest in cooking for her family. The food on display seems to evoke the flesh of the dismembered bodies: “Pink slices of ham. Red shoulder of beef shot through with whitish sinews. Pale pink pork. Fine-grained ground beef, red, pink and white. Dark red chicken gizzards outlined in yellowish fat” (325). She finds herself unable to simultaneously perform her job dismembering bodies and cutting meat with which to feed her family, both because the blood and flesh of animals evoke the human bodies she deals with in her business, and because continuing to cook ties her to her former gendered role in the home, which is at odds with the new work she has chosen to perform. At the supermarket, Masako reflects that, “Dinner on the table was somehow proof that their family still existed” (326), and when she stops cooking, she is finally able to acknowledge that her family life is over. This affords Masako a freedom not possible for Yoshie, who, upon hearing of Masako’s decision remarks, “You’re lucky you can just decide not to cook. If I did that, Issey [her grandchild] and Granny would starve to death” (327). Furthermore, Kuniko’s frivolous and lonely lifestyle is suggested by her outright refusal to cook. The importance of food in the narrative further emphasizes the importance of its production and consumption as a means of defying or conforming to expected gender roles.

Masako is able to reclaim her autonomy, in part, by rejecting her role as a producer of food, but as Seaman suggests Satake’s rape returns her to that site and the life she is attempting to escape. Masako manages to prevent her own murder, but the text does not offer a straightforward narrative of empowerment. Although she does eventually succeed in escaping and murdering Satake, Masako’s apparent enjoyment of her own sexual subjection seems to resist a feminist reading. Seaman tries to mediate this disconnect by focusing on Satake’s murder and the money Masako takes from him, but the protagonist’s dual roles as victim and perpetrator
of violence cannot be as easily disentangled as Seaman’s reading implies, and the problematic
taste of the final encounter remains unresolved in her analysis. An exchange earlier in the text
between Masako’s partner Jumonji and his friend Soga helps, in part, to disentangle the
contradiction of the final scene. When meeting Jumonji for drinks, Soga begins to lecture his
friend on Murakami Ryū’s novel *Love and Pop*, a novel about teenage girls turning to
prostitution: “Murakami and these girls, they hate the old men, the ones who run this country.
And you might say the kind of work we do starts from the same place – hating those old geezers.
They’re misfits, just like we’re misfits. You see what I mean?” (247). Although this exchange is
part of discussion in which the male Soga makes the humorous assertion that Murakami “knows
women,” it should not be simply disregarded as trivial. It raises the issue of *enjo kōsai*
(compensated dating) in which teenage girls sell dates, and often sexual services, in return for
money and gifts from older men. The appearance of the phenomenon coincided with the shift
away from the bubble economy of the eighties and is represented in several of Murakami’s
books. In an article published in *Japan Quarterly*, Mark Schreiber includes these girls in his
discussion about Juvenile Crime in 1990s Japan. Schreiber points out that rather than collapsing
sexual mores or an increase in promiscuity, the practice of compensated dating signals “the
availability of easy money” (85), allowing girls in an economically precarious society to obtain
brand name goods and plan for their future. The practice may present men who fetishize teenage
girls with a way of actualizing their fantasies and a means to “recapture their youth” (85). This
analysis seems to apply to the depiction of *enjo kōsai* in *Out*, where the youth-obsessed Jumonji
is a client of these services and Yoshie’s impoverished daughter Miki is a possible provider.12
Moreover, the mention of *Love and Pop* invites a comparison between Kirino’s narrative and
Murakami’s books, which, like *Out*, often feature marginal protagonists whose lives are
interrupted by intense encounters with violence and sex.
In a paper on the literary career of Murakami Ryū, Stephen Snyder argues that the author uses explicit imagery to confront the reader with the extreme realities that have been stamped out of contemporary Japanese life. According to Snyder, Murakami’s works like *Piasshingu* (*Piercing*) present depictions of “‘evil’ sex” (202) that, though grotesque, provide an alternative to the threat of mundane life. This reading of Murakami’s output could also be applied to *Out*, where Kirino’s protagonists are faced with a daily life that is not only tedious, but also degrading and precarious. Soga’s claim that he and Jumonji are “misfits” in the vein of a Murakami protagonist applies much more appropriately to Masako and the other women whose only option for exercising autonomy is through a form of extreme violence that offers an alternative to the repressive realities of ordinary life.

While the body dismemberment business provides an obvious example of Snyder’s analysis, a similar form of extreme violence occurs in the climactic scene in the novel. Masako’s escape from a lifetime of marginality can only transpire once she has confronted her own emptiness, which she sees mirrored in Satake. After Satake explains that he knows there is something “broken” in her, she begins to take pleasure in Satake’s sexual violence. She is able to understand and even love Satake, because she believes they are both similarly scarred and sees the same vacancy in his eyes that she sees in herself. This experience of violence exposes the reality that Masako has ignored throughout the narrative – that her life thus far has been unsubstantial. Once she has acknowledged that emptiness, she finally succeeds in escaping and murdering Satake, suggesting the possibility of freedom not simply by escaping the gendered domination of her old life but by becoming complicit in a more extreme form of violence.

This situation is, in part, a result of the dire economic conditions precipitated by the recession in the nineties, but the roots of many of the novel’s problems go back to the period of economic prosperity that followed the war. Written nearly fifteen years before the recession, Abe
Kōbō presents a similar image of bodily mechanization and degradation in his text *Secret Rendezvous*. The novel opens with a man leading a mundane daily existence when an ambulance pulls up to their house and carries off his seemingly healthy wife. Confused and anxious, the man searches local hospitals for her until he stumbles on a massive labyrinthine complex in the heart of the city. His wife, the man is told, disappeared from the hospital waiting room, moving somewhere into the bowels of the hospital. In order to find her he takes a job as a security guard but is forced to contend with the hospital director’s constant attempts to disrupt his search. Towards the end of the novel, he attends a festival and witnesses a woman who may or may not be his wife engaged in a bizarre competition. Masked and strapped to a bed with several wires and electronic devices measuring her biological functions, she and several other women are having sex with a number of male partners to see who can experience the most orgasms. Rather than confront or rescue his wife, the protagonist escapes into the tunnels underneath the hospital with a young girl who is wasting away. Alone in the dark, the two individuals hold each other and wait for death.

Christopher Bolton devotes a chapter of his book on the work of Abe Kōbō *Sublime Voices* to *Secret Rendezvous*. In the chapter, Bolton focuses on the use of language in the text to suggest that Abe is attempting to deconstruct the ways technology affects human interaction. Although he touches on the orgasm contest at the end of the novel, he asserts that the competition and other depictions of sex in Abe’s novel simply underscore the novel’s “broader theme of human relations” (225). While this may be the case, Abe’s use of the female body to produce this commentary has the undeniable effect of drawing attention to the technological objectification of women within the text. The world that Abe depicts is one in which the genders have been irreparably divided, with men acting as perpetrators of sexual violence and women as victims.
In her book *The Fantastic in Modern Japanese Literature*, Susan Napier details the importance of this dichotomy. She argues that the absence of women in *Secret Rendezvous* is a theme frequently repeated in post-war Japanese literature and states that it is symbolic of the disconnect between men and women in postwar Japan. According to Napier, the stereotypical image of women was historically one of security and peace, but this changed in the postwar period: “Women no longer offer any sort of refuge; instead they are part of the web of entrapment which modern society appears to be weaving around its citizens” (55). The protagonist in *Secret Rendezvous* is searching for something that does not exist. Though he is encouraged to confirm the identity of his wife, he ultimately chooses not to because confirmation would be inconsequential; the hospital has already succeeded in separating the couple.

In *Secret Rendezvous*, the mechanization of the female body is the culmination of the narrative, and there is no potential for any form of freedom from the hospital’s controls. In fact, the protagonist is told that the woman who may be his wife is suffering from a form of “personality forfeiture” (*jinkaku hōki*):

She had a mild brain concussion. When she came to, she suddenly found herself surrounded by a circle of white-masked men. As a matter of fact, it was nothing but an ordinary examining room, but your wife jumped to the conclusion that she was going to be gang-raped. Rape delusion, you see, is a defensive arousal mechanism for escaping from the fear of rape. (171-72)

The dehumanizing horrors of the hospital have robbed the woman of her identity, and reduced her to a sexual object. This proves traumatic for the protagonist, who runs away when he realizes the woman participating in the competition may be his wife. This is an act of retreat, but it is significant because it is still an autonomous act. Throughout the first two parts of the novel, the hospital director has encouraged the protagonist to write in the third person, but in the depths of
the hospital he reclaims his identity by shifting to the first person for the final part of the narrative. It is a small act of rebellion but it represents a freedom that the woman who may have been his wife lacks. She has been rendered a spectacle without any form of subjectivity let alone autonomy. Here again, Abe reinforces the notion of a gender divide. Though both parties are doomed, the male protagonist can still choose retreat and death, while his wife has no choice at all.

The impossibility of reconciliation and the sexual domination of female bodies link Abe’s novel to *Out*, but Kirino’s resolution is both more disturbing and more hopeful. Objectification is the one fate that Masako resists. Seaman suggests that by placing Masako on the conveyor belt, Satake is attempting to return her to her role as a producer. While reaffirming her marginal position within the gendered workplace is indeed significant, it is also worth noting that this act equates her with the product of her labour: “She lay on the rack, like a meal about to be rolled down the line” (394). Her role as a product of industrialized consumption mirrors her role in Satake’s fantasy as a mere “living prop” (*namami no dōgu*). She refuses to accept this fantasy when she asks Satake to untie her so she can climax. Once free, she is able to turn the tables on her captor and prevents herself from being a passive object like the masked woman in *Secret Rendezvous*. Furthermore, the protagonist of *Out* also resists objectification because she ultimately finds a partner in Satake. Like the “personality forfeiture” that afflicted the wife in *Secret Rendezvous*, the relationship between victim and aggressor is obfuscated by Satake and Masako’s status as “broken” (*koware te iru*) individuals, but unlike in Abe’s novel, the recognition is mutual. When Satake first starts fantasizing about raping Masako, he hopes that, like his last victim, she will finally beg to be taken to the hospital, but at the end of the final confrontation, it is Satake’s victim status that is ultimately emphasized when Masako pleas, “Let me take you to the hospital” (517). Both Masako and Satake perform the roles of victim and
victimizer, but neither fulfills the category entirely. Unlike the wife in *Secret Rendezvous*, they do not make it to the hospital, and their bodies retain their “broken” humanity, remaining at the mercy of each other rather than one of the institutions created by the society that has crafted their aberrance.

Kirino’s novel is littered with examples of marginal individuals who alternate between dominance and submission, thereby exposing the porous formulation of gender in Kirino’s depiction of marginal Japan in the late 1990s. The factory where Masako works also employs a number of Brazilian workers at the plant who, unlike the almost exclusively female Japanese workers, are comprised of both men and women. Notable among these workers is the figure of Kazuo, a young man of Japanese descent. Facing dire economic prospects in his native Sao Paolo, he decides to leave for Japan to learn more about his heritage and earn enough money to buy a car back home. Contrary to his mother’s assurance that he would be treated as “part of the family” (153) in Japan, Kazuo finds himself treated as a foreigner and forced to endure “mindless, back-breaking work that seemed designed to break your spirit, too” (154). The depiction of Kazuo reflects the situation of many foreign labourers in Japan, particularly those coming from Brazil, who are often of Japanese descent and arrive in the country seeking to improve their standard of living but find themselves stagnating in “non-standard work arrangements” that deny them “upward mobility” (Takenoshita 1178). According to a study published in the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 90% of Brazilian immigrants surveyed were engaged in manual labour and 81% were employed in non-regular work (Takenoshita 1178). These statistics seem to suggest that individuals like Kazuo occupy a marginal position, similar to that of non-regular female workers. In fact, the work that Kazuo has to perform is perhaps even more exploitative than Masako’s, forcing him to work four days on and one off and leaving him perpetually exhausted. Like Masako, Kazuo must submit to the exploitation of his
body, and by engaging in the same gendered and marginal labour, he is emasculated. He attempts to imagine the job as a challenge to compensate for his lack of power but fails to find much comfort in this. Feeling “pent-up” he almost rapes the protagonist, but when she recognizes him, he runs away. Following this encounter, he uses every opportunity to try and win her approval with exaggerated expressions of humility and kindness. It is because of his earlier failed attempt to dominate her body that he submits to her entirely and protects her secret. The novel suggests that the relationship between subjugation and dominance is a fluid one, and the anxiety produced by social marginality and financial insecurity can turn an individual like Kazuo into both an aggressor and a victim.

Similarly, the women who are employed in the sex industry also offer examples of explicitly gendered bodies that are capable of subverting their seemingly marginal status. Anna is a young Chinese hostess and one of the girls for whom Satake acts as a pimp. Contrary to the exploitative position Anna seems to occupy, she, in fact, uses her status as an object of desire to manipulate the men who purchase her services and occupies a relatively prestigious position within her organization, while also enjoying a luxurious lifestyle. Nevertheless, she is manipulated by Satake, with whom she is in love. She longs for him and is frustrated that, while he takes care of her, he regards her and the rest of the women in his employ as “nothing more than valuable objects” (252). By submitting her body to male clients, she is able to attain materialistic success, but is still perpetually wanting because of her inability to attain romantic fulfillment from the only man she seems to desire.

To explain the amorphous power structures in Kirino’s novel and how they differ from those in Abe’s narrative, it helps to examine the social commitments of the two authors. According to Seaman, Kirino herself made the claim that her novel has much in common with earlier proletarian literature:
[In] a long interview included in a special issue of the magazine *Eureka*, Kirino likened her novel, with its grim portrayal of the factory in which the women work and the difficulties they encounter trying to survive in Japan's modern economy, to *Kani kōsen* (*The Factory Ship*), a masterpiece of proletarian literature written in 1928. (199)

Although Seaman is skeptical about this claim, pointing out that Masako’s desire to leave Japan rather than confront the conditions of her workplace problematizes such an interpretation, Kirino’s desire to link her novel to that genre does partly explain the focus on the factory as the locus of dissatisfaction and explains the eventual extraction of its protagonist from that site. It is also arguable that in a world of globalized capitalism, the choice to leave Japan and take advantage of the same transnational channels that have allowed for the movement of the Chinese hostesses that Satake’s employees and the Brazilian labourers that work alongside Masako, escape is itself a manipulation of the system that has exploited her rather than a simple retreat. Regardless, Kirino’s novel provides ample evidence that it is concerned with the often marginal role that women perform in contemporary capitalist society and exposes the violence and bleak prospects they are forced to endure. Abe, on the other hand, is more concerned with the general breakdown of communication that has been accelerated by a profusion of technological controls, which, as Atsuko Sakaki suggests in a review of *Sublime Voices*, simulate rather than facilitate human interaction. She writes, “The novel functions as an effective satire of the information-saturated and obscenity-obsessed society of today” (247). In *Secret Rendezvous* it is not the failure of the individual to redeem oneself that is important; it is the failure of individuals to connect on any level. Although written in the late seventies, the themes of technological subjection and the breakdown of interpersonal relationships have only grown more topical in the subsequent decades, and it is these themes that it shares in common with *Out*. In a sense, the
latter novel places even greater emphasis on these concerns, depicting a world that has normalized the acts of gendered violence that were merely experiments in Abe’s novel.

This estrangement of the sexes, though exaggerated in a surreal fashion in Abe’s narrative, is a part of daily life in Kirino’s text. For the female characters, the structure of the family is, without exception, oppressive. Husbands gamble away household savings, elderly parents require more caregiving than their children’s busy schedules can afford, and children are sullen and unresponsive. The women in the novel are also physically separated from men. Masako is in a sexless marriage and her only sexual contact in the novel follows Kazuo and Satake’s sexual assaults. Similarly, Yoshie is widowed, Yayoi is in an abusive relationship, and Kuniko’s weight and age prohibit her from finding employment in the sex industry. None of the women are able to form significant let alone supportive relationships with the opposite sex. In *Secret Rendezvous* the protagonist is searching for a domestic security that has been lost to him, but the home as a space of domestic security has long since been effaced in the world of *Out*. This is evidenced by the children of the female characters, who are emotionally distant from their parents and defy prescribed gender roles, with Yoshie’s daughters eager to escape the home, and Masako’s housebound son showing a complete lack of ambition.13 This is not to suggest the female characters in Kirino’s book are simply at the mercy of uncaring family members. Masako, for example, has already accepted the disintegration of her home at the beginning of the novel and once her new business takes off, her attention is devoted solely to her new work. She is so desperate to reclaim the power she lost that she begins to perpetuate the same kind of physical damage that her labour has enacted on her. There is no doubt that Masako’s confrontation with Satake is oppressive, but the subjection like the subsequent murder is an extreme experience that proves preferable to the repressive non-existence of daily life.
The woman in *Secret Rendezvous* has a body that is degraded and augmented because of her interactions with men. Masako’s body, on the other hand, has already been degraded at the beginning of text. It is marked and scarred by her mechanical work and the oppressive nature of her home life. She longs for the kind of power she lost when she held an office job, but her attempts to regain that power further degrade and threaten her. Masako’s decision to start an illegal body-dismemberment business, as well as her later violent encounter with Satake allows her to break free of her mundane life. In Satake, she finds a partner who reflects the same emptiness inside her. She has been hollowed by a life of marginality, and it is only when she realizes this that she is able to turn away from that emptiness. In the end, she plans to leave everything behind and find her own version of freedom, but the book does not offer any real hint as to what that freedom might entail. The only certainty is that she must find it in another country away from the oppressive conditions that have thus far dictated her life.

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9 It is worth noting that Yoshie’s mother-in-law represents another social problem facing Japan. The issue of senior citizens who require caregiving (*kaigo rōjin*) presents an additional example of a marginalized group. According to many media accounts, the increasing number of infirm, elderly individuals coupled together with a declining birthrate present a bleak future in which “four out of every 10 people will be aged 65 or older within a century,” (“Japan Considers Accepting More Immigrants”). The rhetoric of such accounts typically dehumanizes such individuals, reducing them to another strain on an already weakened economy. The 1990s and 2000s saw the government implement a number of welfare reforms to help out families in need, but as Yoshie’s situation illustrates, many women are still expected to perform caregiving duties for the infirm members of their own families.

10 As of 2012, labour laws governing full-time, regular employees at companies ensure livable wages, equality for men and women, protection for injured or ill employees, and limit the reasons for which an employee can be terminated (“Labour Standards Act”). Non-regular employees, however, are not assured the same protections. Although Japanese politicians proposed legislation to prohibit discrimination against part-time workers as early as the 1980s, official legislation in 1993, however, promised only “*kinkō*” (trans. “balance”; “Act on Improvement, etc., of Employment Management for Part-Time Workers”). Similarly, a proposed bill that sought to end the discrimination of fixed-term employees and ensure wages and working conditions equal to those of regular employees was rejected in the late 2000s (Hamaguchi and Ogino 22). Ultimately, many of the terms of employment for non-regular workers along with the meaning of “balance” are left up to the employer.
Although Seaman’s analysis of Masako’s unwillingness or inability to confront the social conditions at the factory successfully problematizes the novel’s proletarian connections, it is also worth considering if escape is completely possible for Masako, whose body will continue to bear the physical marks and scars left on her body from her gendered work at the factory and at home.

Yoshie’s daughter Miki begins a new part-time job at the beginning of the text and is evasive about its exact nature. It also coincides with her dying her hair, purchasing new cosmetics and a new showy taste in clothes. This shift along with an encounter with her older sister ultimately culminates in her running away from home. This seems to reinforce Schreiber’s characterization of the two girls he interviews as having strained relationships with their parents that cause them to “stay away from home as much as possible” (85).

As a result, Masako’s son is one of the only individuals who seem to notice something suspicious is going on and arouses the suspicion of the investigators who come to the house. Similarly, much of the novel’s action can only occur because the characters are so estranged from their familial roles and the space of the home that they fail to notice what is going on right in front of them.
Idlers, Shut-ins, and People in the Shadows

I am hikikomori. Currently, the hottest most popular new social phenomenon – hikikomori. That’s me a recluse.

-Takimoto Tatsuhiko, Welcome to the N.H.K.

The protagonist of Takimoto Tatsuhiro’s *Welcome to the N.H.K.* identifies himself as a long suffering *hikikomori*. Satou is a shut-in, who is unable to work or attend school because of a pathological resistance to social interaction. The protagonist frequently expresses a desire to “find work fast and return to society” (10), and, throughout the novel, he devises several doomed plans to escape his isolation. This escape is complicated by the fact that the “society” he longs for is largely an imagined construction. As I have attempted to demonstrate with my inclusion of texts written prior to the nineties, the notion of uncontested national unity was always an overgeneralization, but the recession further wore down the façade, and categories of difference that emerged during this period, like the term *hikikomori* itself, dismantled the possibility of a universal normalcy. Satou is not apart from modern notions of Japanese identity because the category of *hikikomori* is a circumscribed part of that same identity. Satou’s condition is engendered by the clinical gaze that has diagnosed his condition and media representations which reinforce his marginal status. What Satou seeks to recover is the simulacra of “regular life” (21) informed by societal models of masculinity, but the story ultimately presents the impossibility of such recovery. Instead, it exposes new models of normalcy that disrupt oppositional constructions of difference.

The psychologist Saitō Tamaki published his analysis of *hikikomori* in 1996. In it, he identifies the condition as one of perpetual adolescence: “Social withdrawal is deeply rooted in an adolescent mindset, regardless of what age the person actually happens to be. In other words,
one can look at social withdrawal as arising from the failure to mature as one travels along the path of character development” (28). According to Saitō’s conception, individuals mature in a progressive manner, but hikikomori have been halted at some point in the developmental process. Although there are female hikikomori, it is clear from Saitō’s book and representations like Takimoto’s novel, that the condition is gendered as a male problem. Indeed, when Saitō attempts to define the characteristics of the disorder he has trouble considering a shared trait other than maleness:

I think it is a special characteristic of hikikomori cases that there is not one fixed personality trait that manifests itself in every case.

One particular trait, however, is clear. The overwhelming majority of hikikomori cases involve men. (22)

Hikikomori are typically men who have retreated into isolation to escape the burden of attending school, maintaining regular employment, earning an income, and assuming responsibilities as the head of a household. In other words, the book diagnoses the hikikomori condition as a psychological resistance to becoming a productive male adult.15

As a contrast, it is useful to look at feminine constructions of adult adolescence. In an essay on kawaii (cute) subculture, Sharon Kinsella suggests that women who project a cute image and consume cute goods, are, in fact, engaged in an act of social rebellion:

[While the] lack of desire to grow up and take on adult social roles and responsibilities was a feeling spread right through Japanese society in the 1980s, for women the urge to prolong youth and its appearances took on a profound struggle. These young women thus savoured their brief years of freedom as unattached urban socialites through decadent consumption, and also expressed their fear of losing that freedom and youth through the cute aesthetic. (245)
Of course, like the condition of *hikikomori*, gender divisions in this subculture are not complete, but participation in *kawaii* culture typically sees men as spectators and consumers while the vast majority of individuals who attempt to cultivate an image of cuteness are female. Kinsella suggests that these women are sometimes regarded as frivolous, but their appearances in magazines, anime, advertisements and popular music suggest a very different cultural reception than that of shut-ins like Satou. Both *hikikomori* and *kawaii* women exhibit traits of perpetual adolescence, but while the former are regarded with a contemptuous gaze, the latter are both marketable and considered desirable. It is a difference that is attributable to a number of causes, but can be at least partly explained by examining *hikikomori* within the context of *otaku* subculture.

*Otaku* is a flexible category that defines socially awkward individuals who obsess over elements of fan culture like anime, manga, or video games. As the character of Satou illustrates, there is much overlap between the category of *otaku* and the condition of *hikikomori*, and in the popular discourse the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably. Even the word itself, *otaku*, translates literally as one’s home and suggests a connection to domestic space similar to that of *hikikomori*. In his book *Dōbutsuka suru posutomodan: otaku kara mita nihon shakai*, (2001; trans. *Otaku: Japan’s Database Animals*, 2009) Azuma Hiroki analyzes the *otaku* subculture and suggests that, while the term is often used as a derogatory label, self-identifying as *otaku* can have positive connotations (4). This is the fundamental difference between the two groups. When Satou states that he is *hikikomori* he is engaging in an act of self-identification similar to that of *otaku*, but this self-identification internalizes the clinical gaze and lacks the potential for empowerment. He lacks the agency to identify as anything else, because his condition has been diagnosed and prescribed. His condition is one of abandoning a connection to the real world and retreating into physical and psychic interiority, but the inability to fully retreat from the gaze of
others marks Satou out as abject. That is to say, by performing the role of a *hikikomori*, the protagonist does not position himself outside of contemporary Japanese society, he reaffirms his place within it. Satou has both internalized and gendered his own abjection. His infrequent trips into the outside world invariably expose him to the gaze of others, but it is women’s reactions that he fears the most:

“It’s an unemployed hikikomori. The worst kind.”

“You should go back to your apartment. This town is no place for people like you.”

The passing housewives, high school girls, and older women murmured these things each time I passed. (35)

As is the case with many of Satou’s interactions, these murmurings may exist entirely within the protagonist’s imagination, but they convince him that venturing out of his home was a mistake. In such cases he retreats back into his apartment, but similar judgments continue to echo in his head. The fact that Satou imagines women making these comments is particularly relevant. Satou’s excursions take place during the daytime when most men would be expected to be at work, and since it is more socially acceptable for the kind of women that Satou cites (housewives, high school girls, and older women) to be out and about during working hours, they are in a position to cast a judgmental gaze. Moreover, since the condition of *hikikomori* is gendered as male, there is little chance that these women are similarly afflicted. In Satou’s eyes, urban space is gendered as female during the daytime hours, and his outsider status within that space only highlights his inability to conform to his imagined ideal of masculinity. Following the embarrassment engendered by these excursions, he attempts to reassert that masculinity through a number of public performances designed to reclaim his autonomy.
In one comical example, he engages in a drug-fueled fight with his neighbor in which the
two men attempt to beat each other senseless. Though they succeed in hurting one another, the
fight ultimately fails to reaffirm Satou’s status as a man. Instead, the “distressingly pastoral”
(dokomademo bokkateki;17 134) fight attracts the attention of a police officer who puts an end to
the conflict. In a more disturbing spectacle, he hides himself in the bushes outside a public
school and takes pictures of young girls on their way home. This plan is concocted by the
protagonist to reveal his true wolf-like nature after being filled with guilt following a prolonged
period of viewing child pornography. As part of the voyeuristic photo-taking session, Satou
instructs his friend Yamazaki to take pictures of him taking pictures of schoolgirls. Satou hopes
that looking at these pictures will fill him with disgust and discourage him from viewing child
pornography in the future, but the plan backfires when Yamazaki retreats and leaves Satou alone
in the bushes, only to be discovered by his eventual love interest Misaki. The attempt fails to
produce the desired image of the narrator as a predator, both because the picture is never
materialized and because his tears betray his own self-disgust over his actions. He attempts to
use physical and sexual violence to reveal his supposed hyper-masculine nature, but he only
succeeds in reaffirming his own impotence.

This kind of impotence is not without precedent in Japanese literature. Several other
protagonists have upset social and masculine norms, and like Satou and his hikikomori condition,
many of them have been defined by their categorized difference. The term of kōtō yūmin
identified in the first chapter of this paper is one such category of individual, and the protagonist
of Natsume Sōseki’s And Then is representative of these individuals. Daisuke is a thirty year-old
man who idles around Tokyo and lives off an allowance provided by his father. Without a job or
purpose in life, Daisuke’s existence seems frivolous and indulgent. William Ridgeway in an
essay about constructions of masculinity in Sōseki’s work explains how this portrayal sets
Daisuke apart from the zeitgeist of the Meiji era:

Daisuke is Sōseki’s flaneur, or high-class idler par excellence, who could not or
would not engage with society in a productive manner. He was unproductive, a
non-producer in a world in which production was becoming more and more
valued. His rejection of enterprise in general was in a larger sense a rejection of
Western technology and modernization, another common Sōseki theme. (84)

Ridgway’s analysis simplifies Sōseki’s treatment of modernity, but it does highlight Daisuke’s
uneasy attitude towards Western notions of modernity, and touches on the importance of
Daisuke’s role as a non-producer. His unwillingness to work estranges Daisuke from those
around him, and though he lacks Satou’s obvious social isolation, he feels similarly alienated, a
condition associated in the text with his exclusion from modernity: “Moreover, Daisuke began to
be beset by a kind of anxiety peculiar to modern Japan. This anxiety was a primitive
phenomenon arising from lack of faith between individuals” (102). Daisuke’s anxiety, which is
emphasized repeatedly throughout the story, is triggered by the isolation that he feels from those
around him, an isolation that is at least partly a result of his exclusion from modes of production.
Both his father and brother are successful entrepreneurs and Daisuke’s inability to follow suit
alienates him from the rest of the family, as do his repeated attempts to procure a loan from his
sister-in-law. Daisuke longs for a world in which social coherence is bound by a mutual “faith”
rather than commerce, but his idealism is disregarded as laziness by his family and friends that
implore him to get a job. Daisuke stubbornly resists, losing himself in luxury and avoiding any
commitments that might upset his lifestyle.

The protagonist of Dazai Osamu’s No Longer Human presents another model of social
exclusion. Yōzō is a young man struggling with vice and depression. He defines himself in
oppositional terms, believing that he is unfit to join society: “People talk of ‘social outcasts.’ The words apparently denote the miserable losers of the world, the vicious ones, but I feel as though I have been a ‘social outcast’ from the moment I was born” (67). The word Dazai uses in the original Japanese text, hikagemono (396), literally “a person in the shadows,” provides another example of categorized difference. It is a much more fluid category than either kōtō yūmin or hikikomori, but it does reflect the fact that, like Satou, Yōzō has constructed an imagined homogenous society and turned himself into its exception. Yōzō longs for a romanticism that has been stamped out by the industrialization that surrounds him. The mundane and practical functions of everyday objects like pillow cases and sheets stir a “dark depression” (22). He is similarly uncomfortable with financial transactions, and the thought of paying a bill fills him with dread. It is the products of modernity that stir anxiety and unhappiness in Yōzō, and his depression is the result of living in a world where capitalism has reduced every aspect of life to exchange value and utilitarian purpose.

Both Daisuke and Yōzō are emasculated by their failure to live up to the normative social models of their period. In particular, both men diverge sharply from the violent conceptions of masculinity engendered by war. Sōseki’s novel takes place in the period following the end of the Sino-Russian war, and Daisuke’s willful cowardice contrasts his father’s pride in having fought. Similarly, No Longer Human, published in the postwar period, features a protagonist whose despondent and listless personality bears little resemblance to the masculine performances associated with the violent conflict of World War II. Although Yōzō’s story is set in the 1930s just prior to the onset of militarism, it is clear that the protagonist has no place in the culture of interwar Japan. The epilogue, which takes place after the war, even suggests that Yōzō may have died at some point during the ten-year interval that separates the bulk of the narrative from the epilogue. This reveals that Yōzō’s male alterity is not simply a result of his exclusion from
capitalist production. Like Daisuke before him, he is also emasculated by his inability to conform to the standards of masculinity defined by Japan’s move towards militarism.

Although war is absent from Satou’s narrative, his difference is produced by the similarly momentous collapse of Japan’s economic system. The boom of the sixties, seventies, and eighties cast the Japanese “salaryman” as the new standard of masculinity. These individuals were often imagined as combatants in public discourse and labelled with terms like mōretsu shain (fierce corporate employees) or kigyō senshi (corporate warriors). Subsequently, the stereotype of the tireless office worker became the dominant image of the Japanese male both domestically and internationally. The economic collapse of this system, however, changed the feasibility of this model. Many young men continued to enter the workforce hoping for lifetime employment, but others disavowed the system entirely. In his history of modern Japan, Christopher Goto-Jones writes about how this alienated the younger generation from the older one, by creating the appearance of a new kind of Japanese citizen:

This ‘new species’ of Japanese citizen was not content to quietly and selflessly dedicate its life to Japan’s economic growth, and it complained about the long hours of work and the lack of time to enjoy the spoils of Japan’s affluence . . . Instead of dedicating themselves to a single company in ‘lifetime employment’ arrangements, the new species were increasingly furitaa, seeking freelance work with a sequence of employers to enable them to travel and to fit their work around the demands of the rest of their lives. (117)

Satou’s alienation as a hikikomori, as well of that of otaku, furitaa, and other individuals is produced by the rhetoric of categorizing difference. The spread of these terms, and the alarmism that they engender, reinforces the notion that there was something not quite right with the youth of Japan. Viewed apart, the various movements, subcultures, and pathologies that were produced
by popular discourse present the image of a fragmented populace, but it is that same fragmentation that disrupts the possibility of diagnosing social differences as exceptions to a homogenized whole. Ironically, what sets Satou apart from the other literary figures I have discussed is that his place within a larger movement, and his inability to connect socially or engage in productive labour even present the possibility of restoring some of the autonomy Satou believes he has lost.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, Azuma complicates the notion that the term *otaku* is wholly derogatory, but it is the work of Thomas LaMarre that is most helpful for explaining the possible power that these individuals possess. In his essay entitled “*Otaku Movement*” LaMarre suggest that *otaku* demonstrate autonomy through their interactions with popular culture. Within the confines of their own personal space, *otaku* exercise the power to disrupt capitalist production through alternate modes of consumption and production, such as the creation of fan fiction and the dissemination of bootleg products. Many of these individuals, who devote themselves to animated female characters rather than pursuing romantic relationships in the real world, also disrupt normative models of sexuality and family. According to LaMarre, this subversion of productive and sexual models may embody a kind of constituent power that has the ability to reconfigure social norms and “inscribe refusal in the heart of work” (391).

This constituent power does not simply belong to *otaku*. The *furitaa* phenomenon and *kawaii* subculture I mentioned earlier in this chapter also refuse some models of productivity, and *hikikomori* possess the promise of similar constituent power through their complete withdrawal from social interactions and capitalist labour. All of these groups possess different characteristics and lumping them together under a single banner, even the ambiguous designation of the “lost generation,” is problematic, but this heterogeneous configuration presents the possibility of approaching the ambiguous notion of Japanese society differently. The difference
of the various groups I have mentioned does not necessarily contradict pre-existing social models, nor does it constitute a single new normalcy; instead, these groups present the possibility of a plurality of normalcies that don’t require a unified narrative of social cohesion. This is illustrated by the twin endings of Takimoto’s book, which present conflicting but coexistent resolutions.

Satou’s story ends happily, though slightly subversively. At the end of the story, Satou pledges his life to Misaki after rescuing her from a suicide attempt. The pledge is mutual and they agree to hold each other’s lives hostage in order to prevent the other party from falling into despair. This pledge is an assertion of autonomy, not through a unilateral attempt to exercise power, but through a cooperative process of mutual support. This may seem to reconstruct normalcy in terms of male-female romantic union, but this aspect of their relationship is downplayed, and Satou himself remains socially anxious and without a job. Both Misaki and Satou are damaged individuals but they finally accept each other without reservation.

The author complicates his narrative with a second ending that disrupts the possibility of a simple rehabilitation. Two afterwords in the text suggest a more complicated reality that the diegetic resolution omitted. These afterwords, ostensibly written by the author himself, explicate his situation and reasons for writing the text. In the first, written for the initial printing of the novel, the writer of the text identifies himself as hikikomori and explains that he is still struggling with his condition. Although the writer of the afterward does not claim the story is autobiographical, he does express a similar desire to overcome his condition: “I will do my best after this. I will get pumped up and try hard” (233). The second afterward, accompanying the Japanese paperback edition of N.H.K. ni Yōkoso! (2005; “Bunkoban Atogaki”) and included in the English translation, suggests that the book failed to redeem its writer. He states that he has now become a “parasite” who lives off the royalties of his book (235).
These two textual additions included alongside the narrative, reflect the reality of many individuals coping with the condition and recast the novel as a performance in same vein as Satou’s attempts to reenter society. While his protagonist is successful in disentangling himself from isolation, the afterwords suggest a more somber and ambiguous ending. He has affirmed his own identity through the publishing of the book, but he remains bound by the same capitalist forces that signaled the alterity of the hikikomori condition. It is not enough for the narrator of the afterword to have written a commercially successful book that has produced anime and manga spinoffs. The only way for the writer to truly overcome his condition is to constantly produce new texts, thereby fulfilling an economically normative model of labour and reinforcing the clinical gaze that has diagnosed the otherness of individuals who do not conform. As his self-derogatory rhetoric suggests, the writer’s failure to do so is rendered another symptom of his disease rather than a simple case of writer’s block or a lack of inspiration.

N.H.K. ni Yōkoso! follows in the tradition of Japanese novels about isolation and alienation in modern Japan, but it discloses a new construction of otherness that pathologizes difference. I do not mean to suggest that individuals who identify as hikikomori do not suffer from a very real psychological problem. The category, however, is one that could only arise at a specific moment in Japanese history when conditions like the collapse of the economy and the re-evaluation of models of productivity would allow for its production. At the very beginning of Satou’s story, he claims to have discovered a conspiracy on the part of the Japanese broadcaster N.H.K. (Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai). The acronym, he insists, is a cover for the organization’s real title “Nihon Hikikomori Kyōkai” (Japanese Hikikomori Association). The claim is comical, but the ironic pairing of the collaborative word for association (kyōkai) with the supposedly isolated condition of hikikomori reveals the very real conditions of Satou’s problem. His isolation is produced by the social judgments he has internalized, which, in turn, erode confidence in his
own masculinity. Satou’s difference, however, is unlike other productions of societal otherness. It binds him to a larger aggregation of groups and individuals who resist the prescribed norms of capitalist exchange and labour value. Simultaneously disenfranchised and empowered, they defy attempts to assert a single normative Japanese identity.

14 Although I have employed the standard Romanization of Japanese names throughout the paper, I have preserved the spelling of Satou’s name in this chapter to remain consistent with the English translation.

15 The term productive male adult refers to individuals who perpetuate capitalist exchange, both through their labour and consumption but also through their heteronormative lifestyles which typically reproduce the same gendered social models in both the public and private spheres.

16 The term abject here is used in accordance with Julia Kristeva’s exploration of Lacanian analysis in her 1982 text *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* as that which exists outside the symbolic order and upsets the understanding of normative modes of behaviour and existence: “A ‘something’ that I do not recognize as a thing” (2).

17 The term used in the original Japanese, translates more literally as infinitely pastoral, which slightly diminishes Satou’s anxiety over his own inability to appear manly in combat.

18 When first wandering around the city with his friend, Yōzō writes, “Most of all I dreaded paying a bill – my awkwardness when I handed over the money after buying something did not arise from any stinginess, but from excessive tension, excessive embarrassment, excessive uneasiness and apprehension” (61).

19 At the beginning of the third chapter, Daisuke is compared to his father: “Needless to say, Daisuke was cowardly. He could feel no shame in this. There were even times when he proudly styled himself a coward” (22).

20 The manga series was also written by Takimoto and ran from 2004 to 2007 in *Gekkan Shōnen Ėsu* magazine and was later collected into eight softcover volumes. The anime series ran for twenty-four episodes in the latter half of 2006.
Chapter 3
Reproduction and Gender in the Contemporary Japanese Family

Can we excuse the egotism that rejects another life because a man is a father?
-Ôe Kenzaburo, A Personal Matter

As a film, Koreeda Hirokazu’s 2013 film entitled Soshite chichi ni naru (trans. Like Father Like Son), differs formally from the other narratives discussed in this paper, but it shares a thematic concern with the acceptance of gender roles that is relevant to this paper. It focuses on a well-off couple (the Nonomiyas) living in Tokyo, who find out that their son was switched with another baby shortly after being born. The discovery forces the film’s protagonist to confront his own beliefs about the foundation of family life. He insists on the importance of blood as the chief concept organizing relational identity within a family, but over the course of the film he is confronted with the insufficiency of this model. He comes to realize that his acceptance of rigidly gendered familial roles has prevented him from playing a more active part in his son’s life. Koreeda’s film advocates a family structure that is constructed through a set of principles comprised chiefly of mutual affection and the performance rather than inheritance of prescribed familial roles. With the security of the home under threat by a diminishing population and a recession that makes single income families economically precarious, the model proposed by Koreeda offers an alternative more suited to the challenges of contemporary life, and, in the process, disrupts the persistent myth of a homogenous Japanese family united by blood and tradition.

After learning the truth about their son, the film’s protagonist Ryōta and his wife Midori meet with the Saiki family, Yūdai and Yukari, who have been raising the Nonomiyas’ biological son, Ryūsei. The two families are urged to decide whether or not to switch the children or leave
them with their adopted families before the two boys start school in six months’ time. In order to arrive at a decision, the two families arrange a series of playdates for the two boys and get to know each other. The affluent and competitive Ryōta takes an almost instant disliking to his laid-back counterpart Yūdai and contemplates the possibility of raising both children, but when that proves impossible, he makes the unilateral decision to adopt Ryūsei. Though his wife disagrees and is furious about Ryōta’s obstinate decision, she attempts to love her new child. It is Ryūsei, however, who proves the least compliant, refusing to accept Ryōta and Midori as his real parents and even sneaking aboard a train to return to Yūdai and Yukari. Ryūsei’s belligerence forces Ryōta to realize that he will not be accepted as a father unless he actively fosters a relationship with the boy. He and his wife organize a camping weekend inside their apartment, and the new family starts to bond. Ryūsei, however, still insists that he would like to go home, and after Ryōta discovers a series of photos of himself taken by Keita, he finally relents, and the two boys are returned to the families that raised them. Although Keita initially refuses to speak to his father and attempts to run away, the two finally reconcile after Ryōta apologizes and acknowledges that he was a poor father to Keita even before the discovery of the mix-up, but argues that he was the boy’s father, nonetheless.

Blood is evoked repeatedly throughout the movie, not only by Ryōta, but also by his father and the male hospital officials who are desperate to see the two children end up with their biological parents so as to relieve themselves of responsibility for the mix-up. The concern with blood, therefore, is primarily gendered as male in the film, with all of the major female characters downplaying its importance and suggesting that the two boys remain with the families that raised them. Some of the film’s female characters even present examples of non-biological parenthood. Midway through the film, the nurse responsible for swapping the two children
confesses that her actions were intentional. She explains that she committed this crime because she had just married a man with children from a previous marriage and was unhappy with her new home environment. She resented the Nonomiyas for their wealth and happiness and decided to switch their son out of spite. Having outwaited the statute of limitations, she admits to her crime several years later in court and asks the two families for forgiveness. The change of heart, she states, was motivated by a change in her family. As the years passed, she began to love her stepchildren as her own, and she came to realize the damage her decision must have caused. Similarly, Ryōta himself was raised not by his biological mother, but by his father’s second wife, who implores Ryōta to consider that family is a matter of time spent together rather than biological inheritance. A few male characters such as Ryōta’s brother and Yūdai also disregard the importance of blood, but these sensitive characters differ sharply from the emotionally distant and aggressive Ryōta. The film makes the reason for this gender difference explicit towards the end of the film. After a short speech in which Ryōta announces his intention to take back their biological child because Ryūsei resembles him and will only continue to grow in resemblance, Ryūsei’s non-biological mother, Yukari, insists that the only reason that Ryōta cares about resemblance is because he does not have any real bond with Keita. Here, the film suggests the real reason for Ryōta’s obsession with blood: his work-driven lifestyle has left him with little time to forge a relationship with his child. The bulk of parenting has fallen to his wife Midori, and the only way he can affirm his role as father is by falling back on the importance of blood.

The concept of blood takes on essentialist and ahistorical tones in the film, despite the fact that the DNA and blood tests that make the Keita’s true parentage known are relatively recent inventions. In fact, the pre-modern understanding of blood was altogether different, with blood serving as an unclean symbol of death. It was not until the 17th century that blood,
specifically paternal blood, acquired more positive connotations, when it came to be associated with bloodlines, and, by the Meiji period, Japanese citizenship (Robertson 97). The understanding of blood as a substance that contains DNA and bonds families together genetically seemed to reinforce this positive understanding. It provided a scientific basis for understanding familial relations and resituated them within the dynamics of capitalist modernity, where the notion of shared blood helped perpetuate the rigid family structure that followed the post-World War II economic boom. The scientific and symbolic understandings of blood combined to create the appearance of a homogenous family structure passed down through biological inheritance. This is repeated by most several of the male characters in the film, who insist that families are built on blood and preserving one’s bloodline is akin to preserving one’s family. Ryōta, in particular, repeatedly refers to the importance of blood, and when his lawyer friend suggests that his concern is old-fashioned, Ryōta’s replies: “Furui, atarashii ja nai yo, chichioya de arutte yo sō iu mon da” (trans. “It’s not new or old. That’s being a father.”). Here Ryōta mimics his own father, who, in a scene mid-way through the film, urges Ryōta to adopt Ryūsei on the basis of blood being the most important part of a family. This insistence is a means of perpetuating the same family model. By insisting on blood alone as sufficient for creating a bond between parent and child, Ryōta is able to downplay the responsibility of childrearing. This preserves his role as the sole breadwinner for his family and allows him to replicate the same uninvolved role his father played in his life, while also passing down those values to his son Keita, whom in the early part of the film he seems determined to turn into a copy of himself—an independent and aggressive man.

The model of family that Ryōta initially seeks to replicate in the film can be better understood by first examining the role family has played in the lives of Japanese individuals
throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Though gender roles within the Japanese family are often touted as an ahistorical tradition, Kathleen Uno, in her essay “Women and Changes in the Division of Household Labor,” details the way gender roles within the household have changed since the early modern period. According to Uno, the preindustrial household (ie) was typically large, consisting of several generations sharing the same space. Individuals in these families shared in all labour in a manner not as rigidly gendered as those that followed the shift towards industrialization in the early twentieth century:

In early-modern enterprise households, it was relatively easy for men, women, and children to participate both in productive work such as agriculture, handicrafts, sales and customer service and in reproductive work such as childrearing, shopping, cooking and cleaning. (18)

Industrialization necessitated a series of changes to this family structure, which ultimately had the effect of rigidifying gender roles and separating productive and reproductive work into male and female responsibilities respectively. For Stefan Tanaka, who details this shift in his book New Times for Modern Japan, the reconfiguration of the family was not only a result of the implementation of a new socioeconomic system, but it was one of the chief institutions that helped bind individuals to the national experience of modernity:

[The family] is a singular idea, common to all. The uniformity homogenizes the possible range of experiences according to one national idea type. The family has gained a new importance, now as a public institution that mediates between individual desires and national proscriptions. Here, the family, not labor, as the central institution of Japan, has objectified social relations. (187)
This compliments Uno’s work, in which she explains that in order to produce a pool of dedicated workers, gender roles needed to be rigidified. Men were mobilized to work in the productive sphere and women were expected to perform caregiving work, maintain the home and conform to the model of “good wife, wise mother” (ryōsai kenbo). For Tanaka, the family both produced these roles and helped reproduce them, creating model identities that individuals aspired to fulfill and passing them on with each successive generation. This modern structure was then asserted as a tradition in the postwar period, and male productivity along with female domesticity were accepted as a Japanese tradition. The appearance of the nuclear family further enshrined the model and remained as the ideal family structure throughout the remainder of the twentieth century. Accordingly, the size of the average household dropped from four to six individuals in the early decades of the twentieth century (Matsubara 502) down to two to three individuals by the 1990s and 2000s (“Statistical Handbook of Japan 2014”). These small family units only continued to shrink in size during Japan’s prolonged recession, and by the time period in which Like Father Like Son is set, Ryōta and Midori’s single-child family was far from abnormal.

At the beginning of the film, the Nonomiyas appear to be the picture of a stereotypical Japanese nuclear family: Ryōta is a workaholic who provides the family’s sole income, Midori is a housewife who devotes the bulk of time to caring for her son, and Keita is quiet, diligent, and respectful of his parents. The discovery that Keita is not the Nonomiya’s biological child upsets this normative home environment inserting an alterity that is difficult for Ryōta to accept. He wants a son that resembles him as a means of affirming his own life and career, but since Keita is his only child this becomes an impossibility. Ryōta’s desperation and decision to raise Ryūsei is an attempt to preserve the normative nuclear family that he has already lost, and ultimately
forces him to rethink the viability of that ideal and the model of fatherhood it necessitates. Rather than recovering the guise of a normal family, he realizes the need to accept his present situation and become a more involved father, a realization that brings him more in line with Yūdai, the film’s other prominent model of fatherhood.

The Saiki family presents an altogether different family formation, and one that is more representative of the economic precarity of early 21st century Japan. Compared to the well-off Nonomiyas, the Saiki family seems impoverished. With three children and an elderly grandfather sharing the same household, Yūdai’s work in an electrical shop does not seem to provide a sufficient income, and Yukari must also work at a food store to make ends meet. By sharing the burden of productive work, however, the couple is also able to share in the domestic work. It is clear through the repeated shots of Yūdai playing with his children, giving them baths, and chasing them through the house, that he offers a contrast to Ryōta’s style of parenting. This is highlighted further by Yūdai’s role as a fixer, repairing Ryūsei’s and Keita’s broken toys in a way that Ryōta, who is primarily a consumer, is incapable of imitating. This is not to suggest that Yūdai is the ideal male role model. He also appears lazy, slovenly, and greedy to get as much compensation from the hospital as possible, but he is involved in the lives of his children and his role as caregiver provides his family with emotional support that, in the Nonomiya household, is provided solely by Midori.

The Saiki’s dual income, dual caregiver family structure is not the only model in Like Father Like Son that is capable of providing a supportive home environment without relying on the importance of blood and genetic inheritance. The nurse raising her husband’s children from his first marriage as well as Ryōta’s own stepmother suggests that non-biological parents are capable of offering just as much affection as those that are bound by blood and conform to the
nuclear model.²³ Ryōta himself realizes this when he reconciles with Keita at the film’s conclusion, emphasizing the importance of the original Japanese title *Soshite chichi ni naru*, which translates as “And Then I Shall Become a Father.” The movie suggests that familial roles are not inherited or preordained; they are sustained performances that must be constantly maintained in order to create a supportive home environment.

In an essay about transgendered individuals passing as male or female in contemporary Japan, Vera Mackie argues that the social obligation to reproduce normative gender roles is tied to a preoccupation with blood not altogether different from that in the film:

> In the case of Japan, it has often been assumed that there is a simple equation between Japanese nationality, culture, ethnicity, language and racialised identity. The use of the *jus sanguinis* (bloodline principle) for determining nationality reinforces the apparent ‘naturalness’ of the assumption that most people born within the boundaries of the Japanese nation-state will have Japanese nationality, speak the Japanese language, have cultural competence in Japanese culture and will ‘look’ Japanese. (114-115)

Of course, Mackie is talking about the importance of blood on a national scale, but as Tanaka’s aforementioned book suggests, the family is the unit which reproduces and instills the needs of the nation on an individual level. In other words, the concept of blood holds together the very concept of Japanese nationality and constructs the family as an atomized component of that larger structure. As I have attempted to explain in this chapter, this family is a social obligation that helps reproduce the same gendered roles that are responsible for the perpetuation of capitalist modernity even amid the economic wreckage caused by more than two decades of recession. The notion of blood is one of the chief components that ties individuals together in
this family formation and is key to creating the notion of a homogenized family. Without it, the structure of the family must be reorganized around another guiding principle. The articulation of such a principle is suggested in Like Father Like Son as a performance of affection and engagement, but a novel by Ōe Kenzaburō, written several decades before Koreeda’s film also draws attention to the importance of personal responsibility in crafting a supportive home environment and suggests that some individuals were negotiating family structure long before the economic collapse.

As both an author and social critic Ōe has dedicated a great deal of his writing to exploring notions of family and fatherhood, and in a series of novels beginning in the sixties, he traces the lives of a family that resembles his own. The most iconic of these books, A Personal Matter, was also the first. In the book, a young man nicknamed Bird – written with the Chinese character for bird (tori) but phoneticized as Bādo – is racked with anxiety as he awaits the birth of his son. His worst fears seem to be realized when the boy is revealed to have a severe cognitive disability. Horrified, Bird retreats from his wife and engages in an affair with a former girlfriend. Even before the birth of his son, Bird imagines running off to Africa as a means of escaping his responsibility as a father and husband, but after learning of the boy’s impairment, Bird’s fantasies become more intense. He makes plans to take his son from the hospital and kill the baby, freeing Bird to leave Japan with his girlfriend. At the last minute, he has a change of heart: “What was he trying to protect from that monster of a baby that he must run so hard and so shamelessly? What was it in himself he was so frantic to defend? The answer was horrifying – nothing! Zero!” (161). Ultimately, the protagonist returns the baby to the hospital and donates enough blood to save his son. The book closes with his father-in-law’s observation that Bird has changed and now needs a new nickname.
Bird’s return to the family at the end of the novel marks his acceptance of responsibility and familial obligation. The alterity of his new family initially terrifies the protagonist, but he finally decides to confront and embrace it. The depiction of family presented in Ōe’s book is ultimately a redemptive one, and as Susan Napier explains this affirmative vision is produced through sex. In a book comparing the work of Ōe Kenzaburō with that of Mishima Yukio, Napier examines the depiction of sex in A Personal Matter. According to Napier, Bird’s move towards accepting his son and his own role within the family is produced by his affair with his former girlfriend Himiko, during which he refuses to participate in coitus until he has engaged in anal sex. Napier argues that this process allows Bird to come to terms with his fear of the womb and eventually returns to his wife.

Bird’s final decision to return to his wife, a homemaker and loving daughter from a supportive and well-off family, seems to suggest that Bird’s journey is a normative one. Early in the text before learning about his son’s impairment, Bird seeks to dispel his fantasies of leaving for Africa by focusing on the pride engendered by his new familial role: “Bird had himself and his wife to support, and now the existence on its way into life that minute. Bird was the head of a family!” (2). This pride gives way to fear after he is informed about his son’s condition, but in the end he seems to return to his family. This analysis seems to correspond with J. Keith Vincent’s reading detailed in the epilogue to his book Two-Timing Modernity, in which he reads the text as an affirmation of heterosexual normativity. According to Vincent, both female sexuality and homosexuality are rendered abject in the text, and the protagonist overcomes his deviant sexuality in order to return to the gender normative structure of his family. Vincent describes both the way that Bird must disavow both the homosexual figures he encounters at the beginning and end of the text, as well as the sexual deviancy represented by Himiko. Like
Napier, Vincent draws attention to Bird’s move from anal sex with Himiko to vaginal sex and finally to his return to family life. This move, according to Vincent, situates Bird on a narrative trajectory that affirms sexual and social norms:

Bird’s resolution to “put away as much [money] as I can” for the future of the family is a perfect economic metaphor for the shift from waste to (re)productivity that was figured in the scene where Bird was “cured” of his fear of women as Himiko gently shepherded him from anal to vaginal sex. His journey to normality is now complete. (209)

While his assessment draws attention to some of the novel’s more problematic elements, it is not entirely accurate to suggest that the terminus of his journey is “normality.” This is suggested in a scene shortly after Bird and Himiko have had sex. Himiko reassures the shaken Bird that once he gives birth to a “normal child” he will “know for certain that [he’s] a normal father” (67).

Despite his fantasies of Africa, a “normal child” seems to be all that Bird truly desires, and Himiko’s words reassure him. Bird’s narrative journey, however, leads him in a different direction. He chooses not to wait for the birth of a “normal child” to reaffirm his own normalcy. Instead, he returns to the son that has already been born, and by returning to his family, he is forced to disavow the possibility of becoming the “normal father” in favour of accepting his “abnormal baby” (144), a decision which requires him to accept the responsibility of fatherhood as a reality rather than an ideal.

In *A Personal Matter* and several other novels by Ōe, the family is not simply a social obligation; it is a cooperative organization in which individuals must honour their own individual responsibilities. The protagonist’s final decision to accept the gendered roles of father and husband is motivated by his own sense of personal responsibility which pushes him towards
“forbearance.” This decision hints at an attempt to move beyond the selfish attitude that has coloured his behaviour throughout the novel and towards patient acceptance of his role within the new family. This model is markedly different from the one in which the family patriarch is head of the family but free from the day-to-day obligations of raising a child. Like Koreeda’s film, accepting fatherhood in *A Personal Matter* requires the protagonist to accept the responsibility of family life, and he is only able to do so with after considering the advice of his father-in-law, his wife, and even the urgings of Himiko. His decision is one that comes from reflection and counsel rather than simply being “cured” of his deviance and accepting an economically productive model of family. Bird’s journey, in fact, sees him move away from his early pride in being “head of a family” (2) and towards a much more unconventional arrangement.

As with *Like Father Like Son*, this alternative model is suggested through the symbolic importance of blood. Early in the novel, the protagonist visits a barber and his anxiety over his son’s impairment causes him to fidget nervously. When the barber accidentally nicks him, Bird is forced to acknowledge his relationship to his son: “Bird touched his upper lip with the tip of his finger. He stared at the blood, and he felt a pang of nausea. Bird’s blood was type A and so was his wife’s. The quart of blood circulating in the body of his dying baby was probably type A, too” (41). Although this emphasis on the protagonist’s blood relationship to his infant child might seem to reinforce the rhetoric espoused by men like Ryōta, it differs significantly. Rather than relying on blood to promote a homogenous or unchanging family model, blood is used in Ōe’s novel to force the protagonist to accept the alterity already present within his family. Bird’s choice to save his child requires him to physically join his blood to his son’s through a transfusion. Here, blood is used to emphasize the relationship between father and son, not as
some abstract concept related to tradition or lineage, but as a material substance needed to preserve a life.24

The narrative journeys of Bird and Ryōta suggest the need to find an alternative family structure that is capable of accommodating alterity, but, as the other chapters in this thesis demonstrate, the cultural shift of the 1990s allowed Koreeda’s narrative to be part of a larger cultural movement while the economic viability of the nuclear family in the 1960s meant that the model in Ōe’s novel was an exception to a dominant cultural mode. Ryōta’s situation requires him to recognize the problems inherent in the normative model of the nuclear family in order to become what Ayami Nakatani identifies as a “nurturing father,” a term she takes from a 1988 book by Kyle D. Pruett about American families (95). In her text, Nakatani states that while Japanese fathers typically spend an average of only 16 minutes a day raising children under the age of 5, the number of fathers playing an active role in their children’s lives is increasing (95). She even goes so far as to say that the notion of fatherhood is “in vogue” (96) and suggests that the declining birthrate I have identified earlier in this chapter is at least partly responsible because of the strain it has put on women:

As already mentioned public concerns with men’s involvement of the families have been enhanced repeatedly over the last three decades . . . The latest resurgence is, however, closely related to another, nation-wide “sense of crisis”, namely the alarming decline in birth-rate since 1989 . . . It is now more or less agreed that a major cause of this fertility decline is the established tendency for later marriages or even non-marriages . . . women in particular tend to show their reluctance to get married in the face of the difficulties involved in maintaining
both employment and family duties, given the conventional gender division of
tasks in the domestic. (104)

No doubt, the burden of motherhood has played an important part in redefining fatherhood, but it
is interesting to note that *Like Father Like Son*, like *A Personal Matter*, is a male-authored
narrative, suggesting that conventional gender roles have proven equally dissatisfying for men.
Indeed, in some cases it can even be dangerous. The hectic Japanese work environment of Japan
during 1980s and 1990s saw the creation of the term *karōshi* (death from overwork) used to
identify individuals whose hardworking lifestyle had fatal consequences::

[Karōshi is a] condition in which psychologically unsound work processes are
allowed to continue in a way that disrupts the worker’s normal life rhythms,
leading to a buildup of fatigue in the body and accompanied by a worsening of
preexistent high blood pressure and a hardening of the arteries, finally resulting
in a fatal breakdown. (qtd. in Herbig and Palumbo 11)

This phenomenon, identified by Tetsunojo Uehata, points to the dire health consequences a
work-driven lifestyle can have on one’s health, suggesting that the push towards the model of
“nurturing father” may provide an antidote to more than the declining birthrate. It is clear that
the modern gendered division of productive and reproductive labour can be unsatisfying,
economically precarious, and even dangerous for the contemporary family, but as the ending of
Koreeda’s film suggests, this model is no longer inevitable.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Tanaka argues that the modern family was
successful because it reinforced the model of the modern Japanese state: “The family becomes a
caricature of the various units that were part of the local economy; it is now the primary site that
specifies, on an everyday level, the role of good citizens” (187). This model not only mirrored
the structure of the nation and reproduced it on an individual level, but it also disseminated
gender roles and separated them according to public and private space. Ōe’s fictional exploration
of the family, which started in *A Personal Matter*, complicates this model, by inserting alterity
into it and insisting that family roles be motivated by a personal sense of responsibility rather
than a social obligation. *Like Father Like Son*, further complicates the security of the nuclear
family by eroding the dichotomy between male productive work and female domestic work. In
order to accept this model, the protagonist must also accept that the gendered prescriptions by
which he has lived his life are no longer tenable. This is evidenced by the fact that the
protagonist is only able to realize the mistake he has made in giving up Keita after being told by
his superior that he will have to slow down at work. Ryōta protests, suggesting that his boss
never had to slow down, but the older man replies that times are different and he should take the
opportunity to spend more time with his family. The gender roles that followed the
reconfiguration of the family in the postwar period are no longer viable in a society where a
damaged economy and declining birthrate have rendered them unfulfilling and signaled the end
of blood in itself as sufficient for the perpetuation of family. By diminishing the importance of
blood inheritance, individuals are able to create new families, less reflective of predetermined
and prescribed gender ideals. In this way, the family continues to function as Tanaka suggested,
as a model of the Japanese nation, one in which the roles of “good citizens” are undergoing a
transformation, and men and women have more choice in how they adopt or reject the remnants
of capitalist modernity.
This move also had the effect of reorganizing the role of women in society. As Uno writes, “by 1900, women had been barred from politics, virtually stripped of property rights and the right to serve as family heads, and nearly excluded from universities, the gateways to leading corporate and bureaucratic positions” (41).

The fertility rate, which reflects the number of children a woman is expected to have in her lifetime, was 1.43 as of 2013, significantly lower than the 2.07 needed to counteract the shrinking population (Hatayama).

There is even the possibility of a more cooperative formation at the end of Like Father Like Son. The two mothers seemed to have forged a relationship over their shared experience, and the closing scene sees both families enter the Saiki’s home together, perhaps implying that they will remain a presence in each other’s lives.

A similar concern is evidenced by Midori in Like Father Like Son. One of the few times she shows concern for blood in the film, is when Keita receives a cut and needs to have his finger bandaged. Midori’s worry over her son’s loss of blood contrasts Ryōta’s insistence on blood as an indicator of genetic inheritance.

The government has also begun to advocate for fathers to play a more active role in their children’s lives, as evidenced by handbook published by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in 2014, which outlines how men can strike a balance between family life and work (“Chichioya no wāku raifu baransu”).

Once again the film suggests the changing socioeconomic environment by hinting at the change in labour. The number of working hours for Japanese employees has been steadily decreasing since the 1980s boom. While workers could expect to log more than 2,100 hours per year in 1980, the number reached a low of less than 1,800 in 2006 (Fleck 17).
Conclusion

The process has already begun. It will take some time yet to reach the end—it's not a matter of simply throwing a switch and turning out the lights.

- Ogawa Yōko, “Dormitory”

The preceding chapters in this thesis have dealt with narratives that are tethered to the precarity of a society in recession. By portraying individuals who are alienated from the social institutions around them, they undermine pervasive rhetoric of national and cultural homogeneity, exposing the reality of an economic and social system that has thus far failed to account for the alterity of its subjects. Such narratives are not unique to the recession, but earlier attempts to articulate dissatisfaction with social norms were often disparate—exceptions to the supposedly universal narrative of modernity. Postmodernism destabilized notions of universalism, but it was not until the economic collapse in the nineties that the inadequacy of the socioeconomic model crafted in the wake of World War II became readily apparent. Individuals who do not live their lives within the confines of economically productive models are still labeled as outcasts, but the number of individuals that cannot or will not conform has grown significantly. The authors in this thesis belong to a generation of artists that have been criticized for failing to articulate a social commitment in their fiction, but it seems more accurate to suggest that they are engaged in the task of exploring the topography of a society where a lack of commitment is itself a kind of social statement. Karatani identifies a paradigm shift in the 1980s that de-essentialized modern concepts of selfhood and identity, but bubbling under the surface of all the texts I have addressed is a struggle to escape the normative constructions of modernity which ironically tethered them to that very concept. These works depict a landscape that has not entirely abandoned modern gendered social structures like marriage, work, and the family, but one wherein these institutions often fail to offer financial, psychic, or even physical security. The works of artists like Kirino,
Takimoto, and Koreeda present protagonists who embody shifting ideas about what it means to be a man and woman in contemporary society, and offer portraits of individuals who resist any form of fixed identity or classification. There remains, however, one unresolved problem common to all these texts: within the confines of a culture still often touted as homogenous, can resistance to social norms yield anything other than isolation and alienation?

Published around the onset of the recession, the story “Domitorii” (1994; trans. “Dormitory,” 2008) by Ogawa Yōko illustrates this problem. It tells the story of a woman preparing to leave Japan and start a new life with her husband, who has been sent on a work assignment to Sweden. While awaiting her departure, she receives a visit from her cousin who is planning to attend college in Tokyo. The protagonist suggests that he live in her old college residence, but when they visit the dormitory, they find the building practically abandoned. The manager, a severely disabled man who has lost all but one limb, reassures the protagonist that the rooms are still available for rent, and the cousin agrees to move in. The protagonist begins to feel isolated after the departure of her cousin, and she seeks him out at the dormitory, but after several failed attempts to meet up with him, she begins to visit her former building manager, instead. On one of the visits, the manager explains the reason for the vacancies in the dormitory, stating that after one of the students mysteriously disappeared, he came under suspicion and the students gradually fled. Shortly after completing the story, the manager falls unconscious. As the protagonist reflects on the manager’s story, she grows concerned over his familiarity with her cousin’s body parts and with a strange substance dripping from the ceiling. Anxious, she begins to search the building, but finding no sign of him, she finally investigates the source of the mysterious substance; however, when she peers into the building’s vents, she discovers that the liquid was not blood but honey slowly eating away at the building.
The protagonist is situated at a crossroads in her life between the decaying dormitory, a symbol of her past, and her domestic future abroad, for which she feels ambivalence. Her husband repeatedly mails her lists of tasks she needs to complete before her departure, but she ignores and postpones the chores, and the lists eventually become illegible to her. The arrival of her cousin triggers nostalgia for the freedom of her past, both because it evokes a vicarious excitement and because his arrival also reminds her of a childhood stay at their grandmother’s country home. She begins to feel that her life with her cousin is a “reprieve” from her “abstract” future in Sweden, but as it drags on, this liminal state becomes preferable and threatens to become permanent. By the end of the narrative, there is the very real possibility that she will not be able to escape from her reprieve, as the building manager explains:

> The dormitory is in a period of irreversible degeneration. The process will take some time yet to reach the end – it’s not a matter of simply throwing a switch and turning out the lights. But the whole place is collapsing. You may not be able to feel it; only those of us who are being sucked in with it can. But by the time we understand, we’re too far along to turn back. (72)

Despite the manager’s assertion that she may not “feel it,” there is reason to believe that the protagonist also shares in the collapse. Over the course of the novel the past and the future become gradually conflated, with figures like the missing student and the protagonist’s cousin, or places like the dormitory and Sweden becoming confused in her imagination. When she remarks on this confusion, a humming noise echoes in her head. The sound first appears at the beginning of the story, and while the protagonist finds herself unable to identify its source, she becomes aware that it accompanies thoughts of her old dorm. Eventually, the sound is revealed to be the swarming of bees, suggesting that, without knowing it, the protagonist has internalized the building’s disintegration.
The story offers an ambiguous ending, and it is unclear if security is even a possibility in the narrative world of the text. Torn between her gendered role as a wife and the respite embodied by the deteriorating dormitory, she ultimately fails to move in either direction and is left alone in the crumbling structure that can no longer offer her psychic security. Her past has now become monstrous and degraded, while the future remains abstract. Like the other narratives I have dealt with in this thesis, the lack of a resolution hints at the individual’s difficulty in finding an alternative to the social roles that are expected of them. The protagonist of Out can only find respite from her oppressive existence outside of Japan, following a degrading and life-threatening encounter. Satou’s purported failure to live a normal life in Welcome to N. H. K. repeats the rhetoric of prescribed male labour roles. The conflict in Like Father Like Son, revolves around Ryōta’s inability to consider an alternative to the rigid father and son dynamic under which he was raised. In each case, these characters’ struggle with deviation from a social norm isolates and alienates these individuals and, in some cases, even puts them in danger, but like the narrator in “Domitorii” they remain unwilling or unable to return to what might be considered a normative existence.

Though Japan’s unique history and experience of capitalist modernity expose a number of contradictions in contemporary ideas of gender, the global recession that began in 2008 exposed similar problems in other countries. Dianne Negra and Yvonne Tasker examine the relationship between recessionary culture and gender in their book Gendering the Recession. They engage with popular culture coming out of the late 2000s and 2010s in order to question whether the models of gender dominant throughout much of the twentieth century are still relevant:

In the main, recessionary culture is marked by an impoverished public discourse and a deep political complacency implied in rhetorical formulations like “it is
what it is” and the ubiquitous “it’s going to get worse before it gets better” that often substitute for meaningful analysis. In popular culture the recession has largely factored as an opportunity to reboot established, enduring ideological precepts about class, race, consumerism, individualism, work, and (as is the particular concern of this book) gender. (10)

Though the book does not deal explicitly with Japanese culture, it is clear that the two decades of recession experienced by Japan have provided an abundance of both the complacent rhetoric and destabilizing popular culture identified by Negra and Tasker. In Japan’s case, however, the idea of a cultural “reboot” does not seem entirely plausible.

As I stated in the introduction, the disintegration of modernity did not mean that individuals were fully able to escape the ubiquity of its institutions. Tomiko Yoda writes about this apparent contradiction in an essay about the need to re-evaluate Japan’s recession. She cites Murakami Ryū as one of the critics who identified the problems with this conflicted system:

Thus Japanese youths are still being force-fed the anachronistic ideologies of modernization—taught to compete for the monolithic postwar Japanese middle-class goals of good diploma, good job at a big company, and good marriages (for girls)—centered on institutions such as homes, schools, and corporations that used to socialize individuals into national subjects. Yet the validity of this message is constantly undermined by images in the media and everyday experiences surrounding the youths. They cannot help but notice the deterioration of these once-unquestioned institutions and their creeds, and they see the unhappiness and self-destructive conducts of adults still tethered to them. (39)

There has not been a satisfactory articulation of an alternative to this disintegration of the modern. Critics like LaMarre have suggested the possibility of a new kind of collective
individualism located in subcultural formations rather than a larger national unity, but these groups do not account for the lived reality of individuals within mainstream culture. Instead, individuals who veer away from what is considered normal face labels like hikikomori or sōshoku danshi, and even within the narratives addressed in this paper, escaping such marginality does not completely upset the status quo. While there is the possibility of delineating a new normalcy in recessional Japan, the prescribed gender roles of modern Japan remain within the public consciousness.

On 18 June 2014, a 35 year-old female politician named Shiomura Ayaka was jeered for her unmarried and childless status while giving a speech at the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly. As she attempted to address the issue of childcare some male members of the assembly taunted the speaker with suggestions that she get married or have a child (Criado). Although some of the politicians responsible for these comments later apologized, the surplus of media coverage that ensued was indicative of an ongoing conversation about gender roles in contemporary Japan. Shortly after the controversy erupted, Prime Minister Abe Shinzō expressed his regret over the comments and drew attention to his plans increase the number of women in high ranking business positions from the current 1.1% to 30% by 2020. According to Abe, the reason for this new policy is to tap into “Japan’s most underutilised resource: Japanese women” (Criado). Abe’s seemingly progressive gender policy, however, further emphasized a cultural uncertainty about the role of women in society. In attempting to delimit and demarcate a new set of appropriate gender provisions with the rhetoric of tapping into a “resource” (shigen), he is regarding women not as individuals but as necessary fuel for a lagging economic machine. In this sense, his remarks impose a gendered social obligation not entirely different than the model of “good wife, wise mother” espoused over a hundred years ago. Abe’s proclamation even fails to address the details of how such a change would be implemented and masks the kind of difficult daily
realities that women face in the workplace, suggesting a reality that once again corresponds to the analysis in Negra and Tasker’s book: “Recovery rhetoric in the recession often suppresses both the reality of ongoing gender inequalities and postfeminism’s status as an accessory discourse to neoliberal corporatism” (7).

Still, while the kinds of social diagnoses I’ve identified in this thesis are deeply problematic, their power is also diminished. Many men and women are no longer content to wait for a sea change. Mainstream culture may still assert a number of normative gender roles, but breaking away from the mainstream, either by choice or by circumstance, has challenged the entire system. The narratives in this thesis suggest that the values and norms prescribed under modernity are being renegotiated daily by those who have fallen to the margins. For the time being, alienation may be inevitable, but the plurality of aberrant experiences further erodes the already untenable notion of discrete gender roles derived from putatively universal and essential cultural experiences.

27 Though discredited by several authors like Tessa Morris-Suzuki, the notion of Japan as homogenous culture is still frequently promoted by prominent individuals like former prime minister Asō Tarō with his controversial “one nation, one civilization, one language, one culture and one race” quote on 15 October 2005 (“Aso Says Japan is Nation of ‘One Race’”). The notion of a homogenous culture is particularly prevalent in how Japan presents itself internationally, and, as of 2014, a glance at the Visit Japan website set up by a division of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism offers an abundance of such rhetoric: “From children to adults, we offer our prayers to the Shinto gods and to the Buddha. When the train is full, we step out of the way so passengers can get off at each station . . . Why do we share these traits? We Japanese may seem a mystery at first glance” (“Japan’s 3 Values”).

28 The manager states that because of his physical deformity, he always takes note of the bodies of others and proceeds to describe the cousin’s arms and shoulders in detail, triggering discomfort on the part of the protagonist: “I listened uncomfortably as he formed his lips, still sticky from the whipped cream, around the words ‘spine’ and ‘shoulders’” (64).
It’s important to note that it is not domestic work in itself that the protagonist resists. She is happy to engage in caregiving for her cousin and the building manager because she does so of her own volition. This contrasts the list from her husband, which is prescribed.

One of the politicians responsible for the remarks, Akihiro Suzuki, initially denied making the comments, but finally confessed and apologized. Although Abe himself also apologized, he did so indirectly, to the male head of Shiomura’s party (Criado).

Starting in July of 2014, the digital edition of the Asahi Shinbun devoted a section of its website to the scandal, tracing the chronology of the event and its fallout alongside various relevant articles and op-eds (“Josei togi eno yaji mondai”). Similarly, the English-language Japanese news source, The Japan Times, ran several pieces on the story including an article on the responses of Tokyo residents (Kikkawa) and an editorial encouraging men to take part in combatting sexism (Jibu).

Abe’s policy can also be seen as another chapter in the continuing discourse on state feminism, which, as Ayako Kano points out in her essay “Back Lash, Fight Back, and Back-Peddling: Responses to State Feminism in Contemporary Japan,” first came into the spotlight in the mid-1990s when feminists banded together to push for gender equality. The backlash from neo-nationalists and conservative groups ultimately saw many of the proposed changes downplayed or rejected. Part of this debate was related to what was labelled “gender free education” (Kano 52). Tellingly, it was Abe Shinzō who initially brought this debate to the Diet in 2005, just prior to his first tenure as prime minister (Kano 42).
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