“We’ll Always Have Iowa: Gender and National Identity in Kurahashi Yumiko’s ‘Virginia’”

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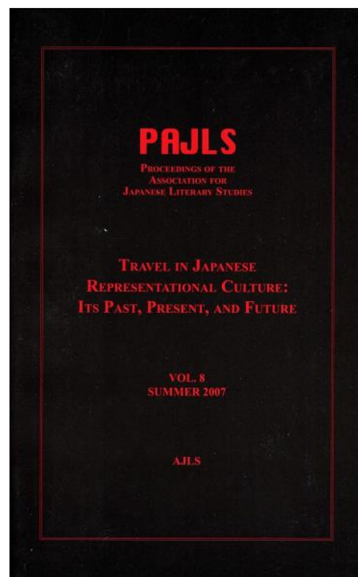

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WE'LL ALWAYS HAVE IOWA: GENDER AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN KURAHASHI YUMIKO'S "VIRGINIA"

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In June of 1966, fiction writer Kurahashi Yumiko left Japan to spend a year on a Fulbright fellowship at the University of Iowa, to study in its prestigious creative writing program. By her own admission, the author was suffering from the fatigue of overwork, having found herself the object of persistent demands for new manuscripts since her stunning literary debut in 1960.[1] So in spite of the professed aim of her journey, Kurahashi actually took a break from writing while in America, using her stay in Iowa City to relax and reflect on her work to date. "Virginia" (1968), the first story Kurahashi published upon returning to Japan, has been frequently described by critics as reflective of a new direction in the author's style, stimulated by experiences during her sojourn in the U.S.[2] While I do not want to overplay the impact on Kurahashi of her American experience, I do think it is productive to view "Virginia" in the context of the author's previous works, as this story seems to approach many of the same questions in similar ways, yet yields dramatically different conclusions.

Kurahashi is perhaps best known for her absurdist, Kafka-esque plots, and for characters resembling abstractions more than real people, who are denoted by an alphabet soup of letters (K, S, L, and M) rather than proper names.[3] There is no denying Kurahashi's intellectual debt particularly to Sartre, Camus, and other cerebral European authors; and yet the themes of her stories have much in common with other women writers of the 1960s who used their fiction to explore the changing roles and opportunities available to women in the postwar period, and their own sometimes troubled engagement with the more conventionally "feminine" topics of marriage and motherhood. Kurahashi's concern with such themes is reflected even in the titles of many of her early stories—

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[1] Kurahashi, "Sakuhin nōto—Vājinia," p. 279.

[2] Atsuko Sakaki discusses such critical reception in her Ph.D. dissertation, *The Intertextual Novel and the Interrelational Self: Kurahashi Yumiko, a Japanese Postmodernist*, p. 182. See also Ibid., p. 278.

[3] We see evidence of this style, for example, in the short story "Parutai" (1960) and the novel *The Adventures of Sumiyakist Q* (1972), both of which have been translated into English.

for example, "Kon'yaku" ("Engagement," 1960) and "Kekkon" ("Marriage," 1965). Her parodic treatment of normative bourgeois values in such texts belies a not-so-subtle anxiety about the author's own difficulty in combining her role as professional novelist with her identity as a woman, and specifically with the demands placed on any young Japanese woman to marry, and bear and raise children.[4] While such anxieties are deflected in her early works onto depersonalized alphabet characters, suddenly, in "Virginia," these questions become intensely personal.

This is evident first of all in the fact that the main female character in "Virginia" is not the abstraction "L" but "Yumiko" (the author's own first name), and her male partner is no longer "K" but "Tomihiro," the name of the author's own husband, who accompanied her to Iowa. Events portrayed in the story seem a more or less fictionalized version of the author's own experiences in Iowa, particularly her friendship with the American woman of the story's title, and the style of the narration strays closer to I-novel realism than anything Kurahashi had previously produced. She even references and critiques her own previously published stories, "Kekkon" and "Kon'yaku," as if inviting the reader (perhaps ironically) to compare the deconstruction of marriage norms in those texts with this one.

In what follows, I accept this invitation to analyze "Virginia" as a kind of rewriting of earlier texts, produced through the confrontation of the protagonist Yumiko with foreign values and notions regarding feminine subjectivity. I conclude that Virginia's character serves as a site of struggle for Yumiko's own anxieties about the possibility of managing the dual identities of writer and wife. This struggle is played out through a series of intense conversations and interactions with Virginia, during which Yumiko attempts to rationalize her own choice to acquiesce to the demands of conventional marriage and motherhood, in spite of her recognition of the contradictions they pose vis-à-vis her writerly identity—contradictions that she acknowledges both in this story and, as author-protagonist, through citation of her own previous stories. Her failure to reach an understanding with Virginia is experienced as threatening to Yumiko's own tenuous sense of security in her decisions,

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[4] See for example *Yōjo no yō ni* (1964), in which "femininity" is explicitly defined as thoroughly subsuming oneself in love for a man. The protagonist's writing career begins, she says, when she loses the ability to love men and therefore "stops being a woman"; her ability to write originates from the "third eye" that develops at the site where her "female parts" shrivel away. (*Kurahashi Yumiko zensakuhin* v. 4, pp. 247–248)

thus resulting in the need to distance herself from Virginia, both rhetorically and in fact.

Kurahashi's literature written previous to "Virginia" inscribes with remarkable consistency a rather cynical and subversive attitude toward the relationship—or lack of relationship—between sex, love, marriage, and motherhood. Reading Kurahashi's early works, one gets the impression that sex is a rather ridiculous business, at least the way "normal" people practice it. In the short story "Kyōsei" ("Symbiosis," 1966), for example, we are informed that sex is actually not very much fun; rather, it is an activity that most people perform out of a sense of "duty" to enjoy themselves in this way, and thus they are usually disappointed with the results.[5] Kurahashi heroines (frequently also writers, and uniformly denoted as L) typically meet their husbands' sexual advances with the challenge "What would be the point?", or else with a firm reminder that sexual service was not part of the contract they signed. In fact, marriage in such early Kurahashi stories is more often than not governed by the existence of an actual contract that provides for the writer-wife, L, to be "kept" by her husband while absolving her of most of the typical "duties" of a housewife. We are informed by one such heroine, for example, that the terms of her contract with her husband in no way obligate her to cook, clean house, eat or sleep with her husband, or have his children; she is merely required to "support" him (仕える). Although what this support entails remains unspecified in the text, we are assured by L that it involves "a lot of work."[6]

While such texts contain moments of playful parody, they most often end on a dark note of cynicism. For example, at the conclusion of "Kekkon," the contract that should have protected L from the drudgery of conventional matrimony has now apparently been rewritten in conformity with the gendered division of labor commonly associated with middle-class households of the 1960s. L, now pregnant, is confined to the home and devotes herself to the daily production of elaborate meals that her working husband will never be home long enough to eat. While the story begins with a subversion of the structure of marriage from within, it concludes with a return to normalcy that is explicitly coded within the text as a most unhappy ending. The emptiness and futility of her new arrangement seem to have driven L mad, and she even begs K, the masculine half of herself that she has had to abandon in order to fulfill her domestic destiny, to kill her. The tendency of such stories to

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[5] "Kyōsei," p. 109.
[6] Ibid., p. 93.

end with L's failure to subvert the structure of conventional marriage underscores two primary themes that link the author's early works—a subtle message of protest at the deadly mediocrity of so many Japanese women's lives, and a lament that the centripetal force of bourgeois marriage ideology is so difficult to resist.

The rhetorical force of these earlier stories stands in stark contrast to the attitude of resignation to marriage and motherhood demonstrated by Yumiko's character in "Virginia." This is most evident in one pivotal sequence, where Virginia unwittingly hurts Yumiko's feelings by directly challenging her reasons for marrying her husband. Virginia's perspective, as a woman with children who is separated from her husband, is both individualistic and idealistic—one marries for love, and when love breaks down, one finds a way to support oneself. Yumiko freely admits that she did not marry for love, but claims to see nothing wrong with this strategy; it enables her to pursue her art without having to worry about compromising it for commercial purposes. In fact, we learn through internal monologue that the pressures of producing "art" on a constant series of deadlines was one reason she left her own country for a sabbatical in the U.S.: "In Japan the same thing happens. My fiction and essay writing was clearly a kind of *job*, and I married so that I could get by without having to do this kind of *job*. (Virginia doesn't understand this. Americans, who cannot live without a *job*, could never understand this.)"[7]

As in many other episodes in this text, Yumiko interprets the communication gap between herself and Virginia here to be a product of national and cultural difference that is also explicitly gendered. Yumiko understands Virginia's model of "appropriate" feminine subjectivity as placing independence and self-determination above practical concerns; this implies that even a job that is distasteful is acceptable so long as it prevents one from being dependent on a man whom one does not love. Yumiko claims to have no such qualms, and while her practical view of such matters would be perfectly logical in a contemporary Japanese context, she is suddenly forced to defend herself when confronted with American values that bring such choices into question.

Interestingly, in attempting to explain herself to Virginia, she adopts a highly self-defensive strategy of rhetorical misdirection, focusing on broad societal trends rather than her own desires and preferences. Thus, we are presented in this section of the text with two contradictory narratives—an internal monologue that gives us access to what Yumiko

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[7] "Virginia," p. 221. Italicized words are in English in the original.

is really thinking, and the substance of her conversation with Virginia. Rather than actually voice her contempt for the pursuit of a "job" at any cost—a perspective that she attributes to American ways of thinking—she offers Virginia more abstract sociological reasons for why women in Japan find it difficult to work outside the home: Men of means prefer their wives to stay home. Women have fewer career opportunities, and are expected to abandon their careers upon marriage.[8] While these things are certainly true, we know from her own internal monologue that she has no desire to work outside the home, and yet she focuses in her argument with Virginia on the external barriers to doing that which she has no intention of doing in the first place. In consistently relying on sociological explanations which have little to do with her own choices, she both neutralizes Virginia's objections about the prospect of marrying for reasons other than love, and naturalizes this state of affairs as unchanging and unchangeable.

This self-defensive posture is further evident in Yumiko's scornful anticipation of the following rebuttal to her argument: "But then women become dolls who understand nothing except for what goes on inside the home, most Americans would argue. As if Japan still existed in the age before Nora."[9] While on one level Yumiko appears to be dismissing this argument out of hand, the phrasing of this passage demonstrates that she is all too aware of the logic of the argument that she is attempting to refute. Particularly in her citation of Nora—the character from the Ibsen play *A Doll's House* whose performance in 1911 provoked a maelstrom of debate that energized early Japanese feminists[10]—as an implicitly liberatory figure, Yumiko shows herself to be sympathetic to the desire to free oneself from conventional norms of femininity. While she is eager to prove that Japan no longer forces its women to subsume their identities to domestic sphere responsibilities, on the other hand she ironically attempts to justify her choice to have her husband support her, because the overwhelming pressures of professional life make absolute independence untenable. Yet throughout this passage, these debates are carried out on the plane of interior monologue; none of these objections are actually voiced aloud to Virginia.

Just as Yumiko avoids dealing openly with the gulf in values and assumptions that separates her from Virginia in this scene, on a textual level this story likewise abstains from any direct challenge to the

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[8] Ibid., p. 222.
[9] Ibid., pp. 221–222.
[10] See Barbara Sato, *The New Japanese Woman*, pp. 14–15 and p. 27.

institution of marriage. This places it in stark contrast to the parodic subversion of such cultural values found in previous Kurahashi stories. Whereas the various L's of other texts do not hesitate to turn the structure of marriage on its head, demanding all the perquisites but none of the responsibilities of a conventional housewife, Yumiko retreats from direct confrontation with either Japanese or American values regarding women's roles. She is also quite insistent—even defensively so—on the compatibility of personal and professional life; she presents marriage as a solution, not an impediment, to the problem of maintaining one's artistic integrity as a writer.

Thus, when we consider the attitudes toward love, sex, and marriage expressed by the character Yumiko in this story against the way such themes are handled in previous Kurahashi texts, we notice some startling disjunctions in both method and message. For example, whereas in her previous works Kurahashi freely experimented with all manner and combination of sexual acts and partners—from incest to bestiality—in a willfully subversive effort to overturn conventional sexual mores, in "Virginia" we are presented with a highly conventional, even prudish, narrator. Yumiko observes Virginia's promiscuous sexual conduct with a mixture of morbid fascination and disgust, and her fastidious attitude toward Virginia's exploits prompted one critic, startled by the disjunction between this and previous works, to exclaim that the Yumiko of this story seems as "domestic" as any "regular Japanese girl."[11]

The ending of "Virginia," too, illustrates a kind of resignation, not just to the conventional role of wife, but to motherhood as well. When questioned by Virginia as to why she is returning to Japan, she replies that she and her husband have decided to have a child.[12] The text is remarkably silent on the logic that led up to this choice, even though we are led to believe earlier in the story that Yumiko does not want children.[13] Though the protagonists L of previous stories have balked at the prospect of having children—and in fact pregnancy in early Kurahashi works is more often than not treated as a void of death or destruction[14]—in "Virginia" Yumiko blithely accepts the mantle of motherhood as if it is an unavoidable consequence of marriage.

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[11] Takeda Taijun, in a roundtable discussion held one month after the first publication of "Virginia," in the same periodical [*Gunzō* v. 24 no. 1 (Jan. 1969), p. 278].
[12] "Virginia," p. 232.
[13] Ibid., p. 226.
[14] See especially "Natsu no owari" (1960), "Yōjo no yō ni" (1964), and "Kekkon" (1965).

In each of these sequences, we see Yumiko either unwilling or unable to resolve the contradictions between her personal aspirations and the reality of pressures to conform to conventional feminine roles. Yet her confrontation with American values requires her to justify these choices, and when her ability to articulate her rationale breaks down, she resolves this tension by distancing herself from Virginia. This is achieved both within the diegesis of the story, through Yumiko's construction of emotional barriers between herself and Virginia, and on a textual level, through a series of metaphors and other literary devices that mediate their relationship within the narrative.

Yumiko describes her level of interaction with Virginia as somewhere between a kind of superficial acquaintance and unmitigated intimacy, and insists that while Virginia might have wanted a closer bond, she preferred to maintain some degree of distance between them. Rather than a relationship between two corporeal human beings, Yumiko prefers to think of their interaction as akin to the process of reading: "If Virginia also saw me as an interesting book from Japan (and that is what I wanted), then we were both able to create a distinctive sort of bond as two living books who read each other."[15] By placing the emphasis on a relatively intellectualized sort of exchange, whereby the two understood each other intuitively but stopped short of actual emotional closeness, Yumiko is able to contain the challenge to her own tenuous compromise with domesticity posed by the irresolvable difference that Virginia represents.

Ultimately, Virginia can only be rendered comprehensible by accepting her inscrutability; Yumiko's solution is literally to understand her as a member of a different species, an "animal"-like being who requires and actively seeks intimacy with others. Yumiko contrasts this with her own "plant"-like personality, meaning the type of person who insulates herself from excessive interaction with others. Later in the narrative, this binary distinction between "animal"- and "plant"-like people is given a distinctly racial and cultural turn, and is used to describe all manner of irreconcilable differences, from communication strategies to sleep patterns.[16] As Yumiko draws closer to her return to Japan, she begins to distance herself further from both her friendship with Virginia and American life generally speaking.

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[15] "Virginia," p. 190.

[16] Japanese people, we are told, enjoy a kind of "plant-like" sleep, given their custom of laying the futon directly on tatami matting, a pleasure that even the great American scholar Ruth Benedict was unable to understand. Ibid., p. 205.

> That intimacy like the tickle of static electricity given off by two hands that brush against one another, Virginia's raspy voice and pleasant smell (I forgot to ask Virginia the name of the perfume she used), those conversations where we peered into each other's brains—I was no longer capable of that kind of animal relationship, because I returned to Japan and planted roots in my own place….Virginia was sad, and maybe she thought of our lost friendship and the inscrutability of Oriental behavior with resentment. But that was the end for me, and there was nothing that could be done about it.[17]

Yumiko first compares her transformation to a snake shedding its skin, but then quickly edits herself, changing the metaphor to that of a tree adding new rings year by year.

This plant-like image of Yumiko in fact works to distance her from Virginia in two ways—both by presenting the two women as entirely different forms of life, and by providing Yumiko with a metaphor within which to contain and restrict Virginia's influence over her. This is most poetically illustrated in the final lines of a story, where Yumiko is compared to a tree composed of growth rings—if each ring represents one year of her life, then Virginia's memory remains safely contained within that one ring that encompasses her stay in America: "Virginia, I've become a tree that hears your voice like the wind, and feels your existence like the sunlight. One of my rings is made out of the bright and colorful memory of you, and you exist for me inside that one ring—that one year."[18] In the most literal sense, too, Virginia is held distant in both narrative time and setting. The story is told entirely in flashback from the perspective of a protagonist who has already returned to her home country, so that all the events of the story have ended before the author-protagonist begins to relate them, from a safely distant temporal and geographical position. The unfolding of the narrative is thus both a record of a relationship that has already ended, and a construction by the author of what that relationship meant to her own sense of self.

In conclusion, while I do not wish to overstate the relationship between art and life in "Virginia," I do think it is productive to read the story in the context of Kurahashi's own struggle to manage the disjunction between the two halves of the term "woman writer"—a term with which, I should add, the author herself was reluctant to identify. An

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[17] Ibid., pp. 233–234.
[18] Ibid., p. 234.

overt and self-conscious re-presentation of the elements of "real" life is perhaps most obvious in "Virginia," where the author deals explicitly with her own anxieties regarding marriage and motherhood in quasi-autobiographical fashion. And yet her earlier works, too, deal consistently and repeatedly with the tension between functioning as an intellectual, in a society where that is marked as a "masculine" quality, while inhabiting a body that is marked as "feminine"—a quandary that is clearly reflective of the author's own personal experiences, albeit cloaked in absurdist and fantastical narrative form.

Kurahashi's sojourn in Iowa occurred at a pivotal point in her life, both personally and professionally. Married but not yet a parent, successful as a writer yet exhausted from the demands of her career, her stay in Iowa gave her a rare chance to reflect on the course of her own life and profession, seen against the backdrop of a very foreign set of values and assumptions that are personified in the character of Virginia. The result is the story of "Virginia," which the author herself describes, in the opening pages, as a kind of pastiche of "fragments" of her own experience. In this introduction, Kurahashi explicitly refuses us the authority to take this story as a direct transcription of the reality of her relationship with Virginia, and it is not my intention to offer such a reading here.[19] In fact such a reading perhaps requires a readership that no longer exists, given our postmodern propensity to render such terms as "reality" in scare quotes.

And yet in "Virginia" we find a constant slippage between author and protagonist—and literature and reality—that is highlighted by persistent references to the author's own previous works, as if to underscore a kind of metafictional continuity between this work and others. Given Kurahashi's implicit invitation to us to read this story as part of a larger body of work, perhaps it is useful to borrow Yumiko's plant metaphor to understand the place of this story within her literature as a whole—with the character-text of "Virginia" occupying one of many adjacent, yet distinct, growth rings that trace the same concentric pattern and build on one another.

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[19] Ibid., pp. 188–189.

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