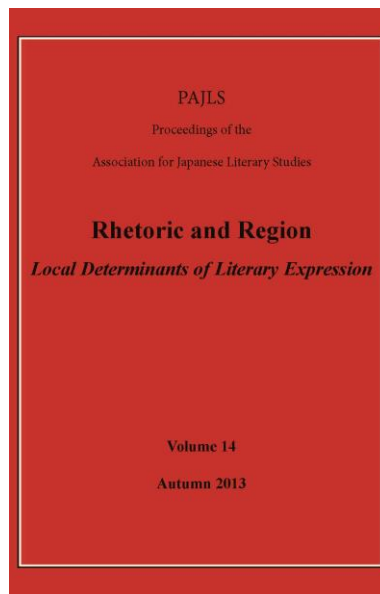


“Playing House: Suburbia and Self in Miyabe  
Miyuki’s *R.P.G.*”

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## Playing House: Suburbia and Self in Miyabe Miyuki's *R.P.G.*

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“Around the latter half of the nineties, the burdensome inheritance tax rose to such levels that more and more property owners were forced to sell,” writes the narrator of Miyabe Miyuki’s 宮部みゆき 2001 detective novel *R.P.G.* (Shadow Family).

In rushed developers and small housing contractors, the former erecting great housing complexes to be sold off in units, the latter throwing up a number of small prefabricated houses, guerilla-style, and marketing them as “detached houses in the city.” Aerial views of the Yamano-Niikura district had always shown great swaths of green farming land, mixed with smaller patches of residential areas where brightly-hued walls and fences made colorful dots as in a pointillist painting—a rare sort of color map in the metropolitan area. The large green swatches were now disappearing one by one, their space increasingly taken over by small residential quarters. Thanks to the recent sluggish economy, the new dots of color were not clustered as tightly and cohesively as the old. The effect was rather threadbare and lonely.<sup>1</sup>

Although the crime narrative traditionally unravels within the dark recesses of the modern cityscape, contemporary Japanese crime writers have increasingly embraced the once-innocuous suburb as the setting for their murderous plots. The suburbanization of Japanese crime fiction not only echoes collective discontent concerning the negative transformation of formerly idyllic geographical spaces in the wake of the nation’s economic bubble collapse, but also reflects escalating skepticism concerning the notion of the home as a space impervious to the anxieties that have long been associated with urban life. As this essay will demonstrate, however, suburban detective fiction, like its urban counterpart, participates in the discursive sphere of the culture-at-large in a mutual exchange whereby, as Sari Kawana writes,

[D]etective fiction and modernity create each other through constant repetition of writing, reading, reception, and reconception. Detective fiction shapes and reshapes the world in which it is produced and invites readers to contemplate their logic, surroundings, and existence through tantalizing mysteries of murder and intrigue. Be it a story of murder or theft, a work of detective fiction lets one explore the dark corners of one’s everyday through an imaginary disruption of that everyday.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Miyabe Miyuki, *Shadow Family*, trans. Juliet Winters Carpenter (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2006), 16.

<sup>2</sup> Sari Kawana, *Murder Most Modern: Detective Fiction and Japanese Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 9.

*R.P.G.* underscores what a number of contemporary Japanese crime writers collectively depict to be one of the most troublesome aspects of Japanese modernity: the grim implications of the nation's attempts to sustain a historically constructed image of cultural homogeneity through the institutional re-enforcement of preconceived norms. Miyabe explores this issue within the context of a quintessentially homogenizing space—the suburban Japanese household—presenting both characters who, unsatisfied with their roles within the conventional familial sphere, seek to renegotiate their identities via their participation in a new, idealized form of family within a virtual setting, as well as figures who go to unthinkable extremes to attain a sense of agency in a world dictated by normalizing forces. Ultimately, *R.P.G.* is a novel about the relationship between identity and place—both physical and ideological—and the lengths to which one will go to ascertain a sense of self in the “*sukasuka*,” or “hollow,” modern world.

A police procedural, *R.P.G.* clinically details the investigation of a murdered man named Tokoroda Ryōsuke. As the narrator unravels the tangled web of relationships in which the victim had been engaged, it is revealed that Tokoroda had occupied the roles of husband and father not only within his real-life family, but also within a “family” that had come into fruition almost exclusively online. Moreover, we discover, Tokoroda's real-life daughter Kazumi is responsible for his murder. In his own discussion of suburban crime fiction, Robert Webster writes,

The slipping of the mask of suburban order and respectability also exposes the more widespread use of masks or disguise in everyday social interaction—so the revelations of crime fiction extend beyond the identification of an individual murderer. The artifices of suburbia make crime fiction a particularly suitable genre for investigating its plots and transgressions.<sup>3</sup>

In *R.P.G.*, an unmasking of suburban order is achieved as the investigation into Tokoroda's murder retraces the chaotic disintegration of the victim's two families via an exploration of the psychologies of each of the novel's characters. Moreover, in extending her examination of institutional breakdown beyond the geographical confines of the suburban space, Miyabe cleverly deploys the conventional whodunit formula as a mode not only of dissolving the picturesque image of suburbia, but also of drawing our attention to an unsettling reality located at the crux of contemporary discourses on Japanese cultural identity.

In her analysis of Miyabe's 1992 novel *Kasha* 火車 (All She Was Worth), Amanda Seaman writes that the author “has created a distinction between people who use place as a defining marker of identity and those who have lost their sense of place and substitute something else . . . in order

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Webster, “Introduction: Suburbia Inside Out,” in *Expanding Suburbia: Reviewing Suburban Narratives*, ed. Roger Webster (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000), 10.

to make up for that loss.”<sup>4</sup> Although for the characters of *Kasha* that which fulfills a sense of loss is commodity, Seaman’s comment provides a useful framework for reading *R.P.G.*, wherein the novel’s characters compensate for inadequacies in their home lives by replacing their real family members with online strangers playing the formers’ respective roles. The relationships of which Tokoroda’s virtual family is comprised are conveyed to the reader via a number of e-mail correspondences between himself and his virtual kin. In the early pages of the novel, these correspondences—and particularly those between Tokoroda and his virtual daughter “Kazumi”—paint a portrait of a tightly knit nuclear family wherein each participant fulfills an idealized form of his or her role, and against which the realities of everyday domestic life are starkly juxtaposed.

Foreshadowing the eminent importance of father-daughter relationships in the novel, *R.P.G.* opens with a correspondence between Tokoroda, whose online alias is “Dad,” and his virtual daughter “Kazumi,” who shares her name with his real-life daughter. In her e-mail “Kazumi” laments the fact that in spite of studying diligently, she had performed poorly on her midterm examinations. Rather than express disappointment upon receiving this news, “Dad” simply offers “Kazumi” his encouragement:

I know how hard you studied for those tests. It’s a shame you didn’t get better grades. But I meant what I said—hard work does pay off in the end. Those classmates of yours who you think are goofing off might be hitting the books on the sly. Did you ever think of that? Anyhow, if you ask me it’s a mistake to worry about how you stack up against others. Just focus on how you yourself are doing.<sup>5</sup>

In cautioning his virtual daughter against comparing herself to her classmates, here “Dad” performs the role of an ideal father figure, rejecting the highly competitive structure of the Japanese educational system in favor of offering a loving acknowledgment of Kazumi’s personal efforts. “Kazumi,” in spite of her academic struggles, likewise fulfills an idealized familial role, earnestly communicating her feelings to her father, applying herself rigorously to her studies, and striving to overcome her failures. This father-daughter relationship is further developed through a subsequent series of correspondences, initiated by the following e-mail from “Kazumi” to her online brother “Minoru”:

I feel like I’m a total mess. If I disappeared would my friends even miss me? They’d just find a new friend and forget about the old. It’s the same for you, isn’t it? Parents are no better. They say your parents are the only ones who love you unconditionally but that’s total crap. Who’d want a kid that turned out bad? It’d be better to have no kid at all. I’m

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<sup>4</sup> Amanda C. Seaman, “A Home of One’s Own: Identity, Community, and Nostalgia in Miyabe Miyuki’s *All She Was Worth*,” in *Bodies of Evidence: Women, Society, and Detective Fiction in 1990s Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 29.

<sup>5</sup> Miyabe, *Shadow Family*, 10.

nothing like what they must have wanted. I bet they ask themselves what they ever did to deserve a daughter like me.<sup>6</sup>

Upon discovering that the real-world frustrations harbored by “Kazumi” have begun to inform the virtual persona she has constructed, “Dad” composes the following reply, wherein his online daughter’s concerns are circumvented in favor of a reaffirmation of the idyllic virtual family unit to which they belong: “Minoru asked me to say something to you because you worry about things too much. Kazumi, your mother and I love you, and we’re proud of you. You are a great kid.”<sup>7</sup> Significantly, e-mail exchanges between “Dad” and “Mom” likewise reveal a clear discrepancy between the real and virtual lives in which the novel’s characters participate: “You know, I think all my life I’ve been lonely,” “Mom” writes. “Things probably won’t change from here on, either. That’s why it means so much to me to know you and to share experiences like this with you.”<sup>8</sup>

These and subsequent correspondences suggest that for *R.P.G.*’s characters the sense of fulfillment associated with participating in their online family stems from a perceived lack within their real lives. This notion is affirmed when the virtual “Kazumi,” while being interrogated regarding Tokoroda’s death, explains to an investigator assigned to the murder case, “‘Dad’ and ‘Kazumi’ were father and daughter. On the Internet, anyway, I’d found a dad. The kind I’d always dreamed about.”<sup>9</sup> Analogous sentiments pervade the novel, persistently underscoring two contradictory conceptualizations of the domestic realm: the ideal, represented by the virtual family embodying such values as “unconditional love,” “understanding,” and “happiness,” and the real, wherein family members are plagued by feelings of loneliness and fear of rejection. It is thus that for each of the characters of *R.P.G.*, the perfect stranger performing the role of parent, spouse, sibling, or child constitutes a preferable alternative to his or her real-life counterpart.

Thus far I have suggested that the virtual family in *R.P.G.* functions as a mode of fulfilling that which the novel’s characters perceive to be somehow absent from their real lives. I turn now to the questions of what, exactly, is depicted to be lacking, as well as how Miyabe’s envisioning of the domestic sphere might be understood as a broader indictment of Japanese social relations. In doing so, I aim to move toward an understanding of the ways in which Miyabe’s novel engages with the cultural politics of Japanese late modernity in an attempt to account, at least in part, for the recent proliferation of suburban crime fiction within Japan.

Via the investigators’ interrogations of Tokoroda’s real-life wife Harue and daughter Kazumi, *R.P.G.*’s narrative unfolds to reveal a family comprised of individuals who lack any clearly defined sense of self. Interviews with Harue and Kazumi indicate that prior to his death Tokoroda’s family had in many respects embodied a number of characteristics conventionally ascribed to the ideal family unit: Tokoroda had received a more-than-adequate salary, Harue had fulfilled the role of the nurturing wife and mother, and Kazumi had been a straight-A student. In

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<sup>6</sup> Miyabe, *Shadow Family*, 44.

<sup>7</sup> Miyabe, *Shadow Family*, 45.

<sup>8</sup> Miyabe, *Shadow Family*, 126.

<sup>9</sup> Miyabe, *Shadow Family*, 102.

other respects, however, the Tokoroda family's relationships had been strained, largely due to the extramarital relationships in which Tokoroda had been involved—a conflict that had culminated in his participation in the virtual family. When questioned about her feelings regarding Tokoroda's infidelity, Harue explains that she had come to think of his habits as symptomatic of a "disease," and to view him less like a husband and more like a child: "I'll be like a mother to him, or an older sister, I thought, and if we get along, what's wrong with that? As we both got older, we'd have no choice but to lean on each other anyway."<sup>10</sup> Harue continues, noting that her resignation to her husband's behavior had effectuated a profound impact on the couple's daughter: "She used to scold me sometimes for not establishing my own identity. 'Mom, what kind of life do you have?' she'd say. I would tell her that how I lived my life was *my* business, and that there were things between a husband and wife that she couldn't hope to understand at her age."<sup>11</sup> Moreover, we discover, Kazumi's own relationship with Tokoroda had for some time been in the process of decline, and his adoption of the virtual family had been perceived by his daughter to be an indefensible act of betrayal:

The idea that he had been playing "family" with a bunch of strangers was, to her, unforgivable . . . "Didn't he ever stop to think how it would make us *feel* for him to do a thing like that right under our noses? What makes it worse is that one of them had the same name as me. So what if it's only a screen name, not her real name—like that makes any difference!"<sup>12</sup>

Harue and Kazumi's testimonies suggest that the domestic unit of which they and Tokoroda had been comprised had been situated around a set of tenuous relationships wherein the roles of individual family members had been ambiguously defined. This is especially true of Harue, who perceives herself as an archetypal maternal figure responsible for the maintenance of domestic relations. Rather than confront her husband upon realizing that she no longer fulfilled his needs, Harue had reconstructed her own identity in relation to him, performing as a "mother" or "older sister" figure, rather than as a "wife." Harue's willing self-displacement suggests an incapacity to extricate her self-identification from the domestic sphere, whose breakdown she attempts to mitigate via her reversion to maternity. In spite of her efforts, however, Harue's familial relationships had grown increasingly fragile until suburban order had been altogether dismantled by her husband's untimely and brutal death. In the wake of Tokoroda's murder, the widowed Harue is depicted in a particularly sympathetic light as her axiomatic position within the domestic sphere is affirmed to be the source of her relegation to the margins of both familial and mainstream social relations: "*Mothers are sad creatures,*" thinks the female investigator assigned to the case. "*We mothers are sad. Left behind. Left out.*"<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Miyabe, *Shadow Family*, 67.

<sup>11</sup> Miyabe, *Shadow Family*, 67.

<sup>12</sup> Miyabe, *Shadow Family*, 68.

<sup>13</sup> Miyabe, *Shadow Family*, 119.

As Tokoroda experiences increasing dissatisfaction with his imperfect real-life family, he, too, comes to occupy a precarious position owing to his unyielding self-identification as a father figure. As Daniel Lea writes in his discussion of the “suburban escapee,”

[T]o reject the suburban in the self results in a form of self-alienation, for although the suburban may be viewed as inferior, its influence inhibits the creation of a home or an identity on any alternative level. His desire to belong leads him to erect complex structures of meaning which are intended to endow his life with direction and security.<sup>14</sup>

Seeking an alternative to his inadequate home life, Tokoroda fabricates a virtual family wherein he might be empowered to perform the idealized fatherly role that he has failed to embrace in his real life. Like Harue, who alters her identity in order to uphold the façade of the domestic sphere in which her identity is rooted, Tokoroda, in reinventing himself within a virtual setting, is momentarily enabled to both sustain the illusion of participating in an idealized family unit and maintain his self-identification as “Dad.” However, as the eventual collapse of Tokoroda’s virtual family suggests, his rejection of suburbia has served only to effectuate his construction of a simulacrum of the very existence he had hoped to escape. Furthermore, his fruitless pursuit of self culminates in his death. The investigation of Tokoroda’s murder traces the chaotic devolution of suburban order, and in doing so reveals the illusory quality of the geographical and ideological borders that delineate the urban and suburban spheres. As such, like the corpses that litter the pages of urban crime fiction, the gruesome image of Tokoroda’s body—stabbed twenty-four times with a kitchen knife and sprawled out in a pool of blood within a suburban Tokyo construction site—functions as a corporeal affirmation of the de-subjectifying forces of modernity.

The trajectory of Kazumi’s psychological development in many respects mirrors that of her parents, and it is ultimately the dissolution of her familial relationships that gives rise to her crisis of identity and, eventually, inspires her to plot her father’s murder. As the excerpts above illustrate, while Kazumi’s frustrations with her family are longstanding, it is finally Tokoroda’s participation in a second family—and particularly the realization that she had been replaced by an improved version of her self—that propel Kazumi into a position of self-loss. One investigator’s commentary regarding Kazumi’s behavior draws further attention to the novel’s unyielding concern with the tensions located within Japan’s generational gap by lamenting what he perceives to be a growing trend toward selfishness on the part of the nation’s youth: “*Maybe it’s the age we live in, he thought. Me, me, me. Everybody and his brother hell-bent on finding their goddamn ‘true self.’ People who think they know all the answers choosing to fulfill their self-assigned mission in life by any means available, with total disregard for the feelings of others.*”<sup>15</sup> I would like to suggest, alternately, that Kazumi’s murder of Tokoroda may be more meaningfully understood as a necessary step toward the establishment of her self as an entity independent of the

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<sup>14</sup> Daniel Lea, “Urban Thrall: The Dissolution of the Suburban Self in Nick Hornsby’s Fiction,” in *Expanding Suburbia: Reviewing Suburban Narratives*, ed. Roger Webster (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000), 10.

<sup>15</sup> Miyabe, *Shadow Family*, 184.

domestic sphere within which her identity is circumscribed, and as such constitutes an act embodying not only personal but also broader cultural implications. In order to do so I will pause here to comment briefly on the nature of the relationship between “the child” and “society” as interrelated objects of Japanese cultural discourse in the modern era.

Although an examination of the diverse ways in which the concept of childhood has been interpolated into dialogues concerning the present and future of Japanese society is beyond the scope of this essay, for the purposes of this analysis two aspects of this discourse seem particularly relevant. The first of these concerns an important paradox illuminated in Karatani Kōjin’s discussion of attitudes concerning childhood within the early modern nation-state. In his discussion of the “discovery of the child” within Meiji Japan, Karatani draws on the work of Michel Foucault, who writes that while in the interest of precluding children from the realm of adult conflict early modern educational institutions endeavored to “form around children an unreal, abstract, archaic environment that had no relation to the adult world,” such attempts to preserve the child “exposes him to a major conflict, to the contradiction between his childhood and his real life.”<sup>16</sup> For Karatani, this essentially Freudian figuration of childrearing embodies potentially disastrous implications when converted into educational and child development theories, for “they lead to intensified efforts to remove conflict and contradiction from childhood, in order to protect children. As a result, the possibility of neurosis is increased. In this case it is indeed psychoanalysis which has produced illness, something Freud would never have dreamed of.”<sup>17</sup> Although the model with which Foucault is concerned is situated within the eighteenth-century Western world, Karatani locates an iteration of the dilemma proposed by Foucault also within Japan, explaining that while the aim of early Meiji era educational endeavors was to instill children with Confucian values that had been the ideology of the samurai class within Tokugawa Japan,

[B]y the Meiji period the Confucian ideology propagated through the public schools was already an abstraction. The ideal of *chūkō* (loyalty and filial piety) had become merely a concept imparted in the abstract, conflict-free world of the school, and it became caught up in contradictions as soon as it was taken out into society. Adolescence is this very state of conflicted consciousness. By contrast, the *chūkō* with which the children of Edo samurai were thoroughly inculcated was quite concrete.<sup>18</sup>

While the society in which *R.P.G.* was produced in many respects differs dramatically from that of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Japan, the “conflicted consciousness” Karatani locates in the modern adolescent would become a topic of crucial importance within discourses on the state of Japanese society in the decade leading up to the publication of Miyabe’s novel. In her discussion of the proliferation of images of the “wild child” within Japanese popular media from the mid-nineties forward Andrea G. Arai offers a particularly compelling take on this phenomenon,

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<sup>16</sup> Karatani Kōjin, “The Discovery of the Child,” in *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 127-28.

<sup>17</sup> Karatani, “The Discovery of the Child,” 129.

<sup>18</sup> Karatani, “The Discovery of the Child,” 132-33.



explaining that the shocking real-life murder committed in 1997 by an anonymous junior high school student known only as Shōnen A (Boy A) served to propel the concept of “the child” to the forefront of public discourse concerning the state of the nation:

In the 1990s in Japan, “the child” and its development became the site of a newly intensified nexus of social anxiety. Disclosed in what for the most part became household terms during this period, *kodomo ga hen da* (children are turning strange) and *gakkyū hōkai* (collapse of classrooms), a larger discourse of social crisis and collapse made “the child” its focus.<sup>19</sup>

In an attempt to account for this phenomenon, Arai continues, writing,

The various terms and forms of fear that in the aftermath of 1997 have attached themselves to “the child,” and the linkages that go on from there to the discourse of the disintegration of the home, are not containable within the standard pursuit of knowledge, with its disciplinary confines. This unaccountable, the anxiety, continues to circulate in the face of the presentation of “facts” to the contrary, locating itself at the site of the child, making the child an object either to be feared for or afraid of. Yet, if we reconsider the site around which the anxiety has gathered—“the child”—as a location built up in knowledge and acted upon through the intertwinings of modernity, then the possibility emerges that rather than the site of the “real” danger, the child has been positioned as a substitute for the recognition of the truly fearful—“a site of displaced lack.” In other words, the locus of anxiety, “the child,” stands for what I suggest is the more truly frightening possibility of a problem at the interior of a knowledge about culture.<sup>20</sup>

Karatani and Arai’s discussions of the manner in which the child has been figured throughout the history of modern Japan illuminate an alternative possibility of understanding the character of Kazumi than that which is suggested by the investigator in the excerpt above. More pointedly, while Kazumi’s actions do little to assuage anxieties concerning the knowability (or lack thereof) of Japan’s present or future, her violent rejection of conformity would appear to constitute an attempt on the part of Miyabe to draw attention to a more paramount dilemma—namely, the possibility that the fragmentation of the home, and more generally society at large, might transpire owing to the homogenizing measures designed to preclude these very events.

In *R.P.G* this potentiality is poignantly articulated by the simultaneous collapse of the two familial spheres in which Tokoroda participates—the seemingly conflict-free virtual realm and the contradictory real one—in the wake of his murder at the hands of Kazumi. The concurrent breakdown of both of these institutions embodies several implications. Perhaps most obviously, by rendering indistinct by virtue of their shared fragility the “real” world of suburbia and the

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<sup>19</sup> Andrea G. Arai, “The ‘Wild Child’ of 1990s Japan,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 99.4 (2000): 841.

<sup>20</sup> Arai, “The ‘Wild Child’,” 848.

“artificial” one, Miyabe underscores the heavily constructed quality of the former, begging the reader to consider whether the actual world is not in fact just another “role-playing game.” In doing so, the author illuminates the reality that the suburban space, which in the cultural imagination constitutes a preferable alternative to the diverse metropolis within which the traditional crime narrative unfurls, is situated around its own set of power inequities and pressures which collectively thrust the individual into a chaotic position of continual self-negotiation. Furthermore, and perhaps more significantly, in extending her critique beyond the geographical confines of suburbia and into the cyber realm, Miyabe draws attention to the ubiquitous character of the axiomatic crisis presented in the novel.

Finally, if the character of Kazumi may be understood according to the terms suggested by Arai, her rejection of the rigorously homogenizing familial institution points not so much to a problem circumscribed within the particular realm of adolescence, but rather to the more generalized reality that there exists a fissure between the schema according to which societal roles and relationships in contemporary Japan ostensibly operate and the realities of the nation’s social configuration. Reflecting upon Kazumi’s crime in an almost celebratory manner, the narrator writes,

Kazumi could never have confronted her father with her anger. If she did, he’d only think she was caving in. That’s what he was after, all along . . . Ryosuke Tokoroda lived his whole life like that. The connections he formed with people were all about *him*. He always had to be center stage. He never wanted people to be more than satellites, circling around him. Only Kazumi—his own child—had had the nerve to reject that pattern and push him away. As any other perfectly normal child would do.<sup>21</sup>

Unwilling to remain implicated in the façade of normalcy any longer, Kazumi transgresses the limits imposed upon her own subjectivity by undermining the androcentric framework around which the household is situated, and in murdering her father effectuates the erasure of the nucleus of both of the families in which Tokoroda participates. As Arai writes, “By splitting ‘the child’ into the designated categories of the desirable and the undesirable, the heterogeneity of children exceeds their idealization, and this excess becomes the material for the production of monstrous representations and depoliticizing effects.”<sup>22</sup> In light of this comment, I would like to suggest that through her depiction of Kazumi Miyabe envisions a society in which the neurotic illness that for Karatani is born of the exclusion of children from real-world conflict has been transmitted to culture-at-large in the form of a collective preoccupation with Japan’s own endlessly deferred identity. And, though Miyabe offers no cure for this social disease, in identifying the household regulatory figure of Tokoroda as the origin of Kazumi’s crisis, the author seems to suggest that it is not so much the potential of the becoming individual or national subject, but rather the discursive and institutional production and re-enforcement of coherent identities, that is to be feared.

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<sup>21</sup> Miyabe Miyuki, *Shadow Family*, 178.

<sup>22</sup> Arai, “The ‘Wild Child’,” 856.

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