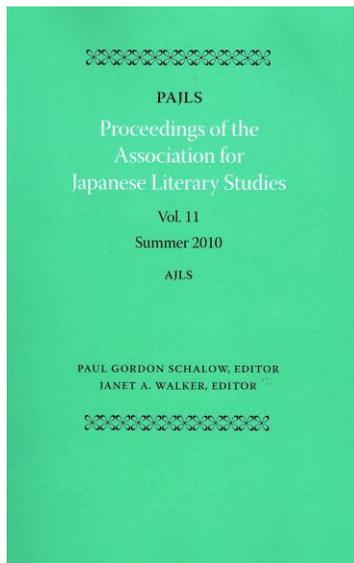


“A Nomadic Sensibility: Wandering, Belonging,
and Identity in Ōba Minako’s *The Junk Museum*”

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A Nomadic Sensibility

Wandering, Belonging, and Identity in Ōba Minako's *The Junk Museum*

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In his article “Ōba Minako to in'yu” 大庭みな子と隠喩 (Ōba Minako and Metaphors), Miiura Masashi compares Ōba's use of metaphors to a Gestalt process, citing the writer's ability to incorporate multiple meanings into a single image.¹ In a broader sense, this duality imbued Ōba's entire life² and allowed her to develop what Sharalyn Orbaugh defines as a “double vision” typical of those who move between cultures. This is especially true in the case of Ōba's early works which, as Orbaugh points out, “concentrate on gender relations within society, which the spatial and cultural displacement of her life in the U.S. had brought keenly to her attention.”³

While Ōba's narratives are deeply rooted in the social context of the 1970s, dealing openly with issues of female emancipation and sexuality, they also reveal a wider cultural perspective and a more modern attitude towards issues of female displacement. This paper focuses on the image of the wanderer in the story *Garakuta hakubutsukan* がらくた博物館 (The Junk Museum)⁴ and interprets it as a peculiar case in which issues of gender and trans-nationalism are brought together.

Ōba employs the image of the wanderer as a multi-layered trope. On one hand, she seems to relate it to a sense of rootlessness and complete detachment, and therefore seems to associate it with pain and loss. On the other hand, however, she uses the same image to suggest a lifestyle that transcends customary forms of

¹See Miiura 1988.

²Ōba spent eleven years in the US, following her husband when he took a job in Sitka, Alaska. As many scholars have pointed out, this foreign sojourn both nurtured Ōba's imagination and helped her articulate her thoughts far from the male-dominated culture of postwar Japan. Significantly, Ōba's literary debut took place after her return to Japan. The influence of her American experience is visible in Ōba's keen interest in issues of female emancipation, as well as in the choice of foreign settings, particularly for her early works.

³Orbaugh 2001, p. 301.

⁴The work is a trilogy that appeared on the literary magazine *Bungakukai* 文学界. The first part was published in 1971, the second and third parts in 1974. The story was awarded the Women's Literature Prize (*Joryū bungakushō*) in 1975.

inhabiting space, thus transforming it into a symbol of liberation that becomes associated with the experience of exploration and detached observation.

Furthermore, by identifying the act of wandering with *female* characters, Ōba adds new significance to the traditional trope: her characters become doubly subaltern as they are burdened with a liminality that is due both to their status as women and to their cultural “otherness.” At the same time, however, Ōba recognizes that it is precisely this familiarity with liminal spaces that makes women so capable of bridging the gap between different cultures. Even though the female characters in *The Junk Museum* appear to be lost, emotionally displaced, it is this loss and this displacement—this wandering, in short—that causes them to reconsider notions such as home and nation. In this respect, Ōba’s wanderers foreshadow Rosi Braidotti’s concept of the “female nomad,” and the affinities between the two images will be briefly explored in this paper. Also, it will examine how Ōba’s botanical metaphors—employed to represent the ambiguous condition of her heroines—are linked to a traditional Asian aesthetic, one rooted in works of classical poetry and appropriated by Ōba to talk about gender and displacement.

Finally, I will argue that the image of the female wanderer in this story prefigures, although in a somewhat nihilistic way, the kind of hybrid subjectivity explored in stories such as *Urashimasō* 浦島草 (The Urashima plant, 1977) and *Rōsoku uo* ろうそく魚 (Candle Fish, 1986). The female wanderer thus represents a transitional image between Ōba’s early and later works.

Foreign Women

The Junk Museum is divided into three sections: “Inuyashiki no onna” 犬屋敷の女 (The Woman of the Dogs Mansion), “Yorozu shūzenya no tsuma” よろず修繕屋の妻 (The Repairman’s Wife) and “Suguri no shima” すぐりの島 (The Island of Suguri). It revolves around the stories of three female characters who have moved to a small fishing town in Alaska from different continents: Maria, a Russian refugee; Aya, a Japanese housewife; and Suying, an Asian-American musicologist. The three women come from very different backgrounds but are bound together, paradoxically, by their shared sense of deep displacement. As foreigners and as women, the heroines are constantly held up to the scrutinizing gaze of their community; they soon realize that it will be impossible to locate their identities in a single culture and begin to call instead for a life that can overcome nationalistic sentiments. This realization is not a simple one, however. For though their cultural hybridity allows them to cross certain boundaries, such as those of place and language, it also has a destabilizing effect on the protagonists, which confuses them and makes them victims of the very deterritorialization they aspire to.

Maria: A Tale of Self-Exile

The character of Maria in “The Woman of the Dogs Mansion” embodies a typical figure in the discourse on displacement: the exile. Specifically, Maria is a refugee

who, after escaping Russia during the revolution, decided to lead a life of self-exile in Alaska. Despite the large number of immigrants in town, Maria does not integrate herself into the social fabric of her hosting community, and her emotional distance from her neighbours gives rise to stereotyped and prejudicial judgments on her physical appearance, her hobbies, and her limited proficiency in English—“iyō” 異様 (odd) and “kimyō” 奇妙 (strange) are recurring adjectives in the denotation of Maria. Maria’s unclear marital status and her decision to abandon her daughter, become the focus of people’s rumors. Maria’s emotional life is indeed complex, yet it is clear in the story that her determination to live a life of her own making is a deliberate choice, one that has resulted from three marriages mostly arranged out of necessity.

Maria’s role within the family is that of the typical caretaker and child-rearer depicted in so many of Ōba’s stories, and by Ōba unflinchingly demystified.⁵ While Maria does not forget about her husband and daughter, she is nevertheless aware of the importance of her own emotional needs and thus refuses to resign herself to an unwanted family life.

At the same time, however, Ōba acknowledges that such a process is not a painless one, showing us movingly how sensitive Maria can be about her past. With great care she has preserved all the belongings related to her family, from her mother’s precious jewelry to the wooden brooch her daughter made by hand; she considers this to be the most valuable object she possesses.

The very act of writing an autobiography reveals the extent of Maria’s anti-theoretical feelings.⁶ The diary she keeps, far from being a mere retrospective of her past, literalizes the confusion of her thoughts, caught as they are between a desire for objective recollection and a sense of nostalgia. The narrative rhythm is often clumsy, and moves between multiple spatial and temporal frameworks, bringing back past memories and historical events in a way that imitates Maria’s present perplexity about her identity.

A similar ambiguity of feelings can be detected in Maria’s relationship with another, more abstract type of “mother”: her *motherland*. On one hand, Maria shows a strong sense of attachment to Russia and its cultural grandeur, as evident

⁵ Since her debut story *Sanbiki no kani* 三匹の蟹 (The Three Crabs, 1968), Ōba has dealt with issues of female sexuality and emancipation by rejecting the patriarchal notion of *ryōsai kenbo* 良妻賢母 (good wife and wise mother). For a detailed account of the critical reception of the story see Orbaugh 2008b. Further, Chigusa Kimura Steven (Kimura Steven 2005) has argued that Ōba felt even more impelled to write about the difficulties of wifehood and motherhood after reading the highly controversial *The Feminine Mystique*, a book by the feminist Betty Friedan that brought to light the lack of fulfillment of a number of American middle-class housewives. Linda Marie Flores has also examined Ōba’s works with a focus on the representation of motherhood in her doctoral dissertation on maternal subjectivity in the works of Hirabayashi Taiko, Enchi Fumiko and Ōba Minako (Flores 2005).

⁶ Nakagawa Shigemi suggests a link between the act of moving, the act of writing and the act of narrating by arguing that wandering and presenting oneself with unfamiliar spaces lead the mobile subject to re-elaborate his experience in a fictional way (Nakagawa 1999).

in the scene in which she complains to Aya about the inconsistency of English translations of Russian literature. However, this lofty attitude of nostalgic attachment is at times intertwined with Maria's critical observations about blind nationalism. She does not fail to recognize, that is, that the use of nostalgia as a kind of balm on the wound of displacement might, in fact, be a fallacious response of her memory, one which creates an idealized and fantasized notion of her homeland. Maria feels a maternal link with her country and her past but she is also aware that she chose to leave Russia and not to return, due to the harsh reality she experienced there:

I was born in Russia, but since I rejected it and don't live there anymore I am not going to say that Russia is my country. But I do feel nostalgic about it, as if that far-off country reminded me of the scent of my mother's breast. Nevertheless, there is no guarantee that a child will love his mother for ever. (Ōba 1991, p. 50)

Further, when arguing with Aya about the possibility of letting individuals choose their own nationality, Maria paradoxically admits that identity cannot be simply defined according to ethnic background, language or juridical belonging. Although in a confusing and sometimes fatalistic way, she catches the emotional dimension of the matter and senses that she will find solace neither by nostalgically clinging to her imaginary homeland nor by adopting an alien lifestyle. As she claims in a discussion with Aya:

In the end, we are vagabonds. Vagabonds who have been evicted. We are a wandering tribe and no matter where we go, there will never be a place for us to settle down. (Ōba 1991, p. 88)

Aya and Cultural Mimicry

Aya's experience, on the other hand, seems directly opposed to Maria's. Abandoned by a husband who did not consider her educated enough for a Tōkyō University graduate, Aya decides to permanently leave Japan with her infant daughter and marry an American, Russ. Her desire to cut her connections with the past is so radical and complete that she educates her daughter according to American standards; she never teaches her Japanese and even adds an American name to the girl's Japanese one.⁷

Yet, despite the fact that Aya's hatred of Japan causes her to reject Japanese customs, she is not attracted to the American lifestyle either. Even though she

⁷Bilingual or biracial characters and mixed couples often appear in Ōba's works, as in the case of the above-mentioned *The Three Crabs*, in *Kōzu no nai e* 構図のない絵 (Picture without Composition, 1963), *Niji to ukihashi* 虹と浮橋 (The Rainbow and the Floating Bridge, 1967), *Naku tori no* 啼く鳥の (Birds crying, 1985), *Urashimasō* 浦島草 (The Urashima Plant, 1977) and its sequel *Shichiriko* 七里湖 (Shichiriko, 2007), to name a few.

has married an American, that is, Aya is aware that her position in her new country will always be doubly marginal, both as an Asian woman and as a foreigner. Her attitude towards her hosting community might be interpreted (to use Homi Bhabha's formulation) as a partial attempt at cultural mimicry: Aya does not fight against the stereotyped gaze of the townspeople who consider her "exotic," nor does she struggle against the opinion of the Japanese businessmen and tourists in town, who automatically label her a "warbride." When addressed with hackneyed questions about Japanese culture, Aya bluntly refuses any confrontation or simply confirms the interlocutors' assumptions:

Since Aya was Japanese, the townspeople would somehow bring up Japan as a topic of conversation whenever they spoke to her, and they would not hesitate to ask questions that showed their curiosity about that exotic land. But Aya just ignored these questions and never actively seized an opportunity to talk about Japan. She would simply listen with a smile on her face. Sometimes there were people who, on purpose, would try to hurt her feelings by harshly criticizing the country and by arguing about its hopeless poverty; but it was impossible to upset Aya with such arguments, and she would just settle the question, saying "Yes, yes, indeed there are also such things." (Ōba 1991, p. 78)

When asked about her feelings towards Japan, Aya lets people believe she has made the decision to become American, whereas in fact she feels no bonds either to Japan or to the U.S.:

When [the townspeople] asked, "Do you like America?" she would say "There are things I like and things I dislike about it; but since I decided to become American, I have made up my mind to look only at the things I like." And when they asked "Do you still love Japan?" she would answer, "Not at all." Obviously Aya did not love America either, but with the townspeople she would just hold her tongue on that point. (Ōba 1991, p. 80)

With her husband, Aya is clear about the fact that her dislike of Japan does not represent a positive attachment to America; but at the same time, as Adrienne Hurley points out (Hurley, 1999: 94), she lets him believe that she is as naive and simpleminded as he imagines her to be. Although Aya feels affection towards Russ, her choice to marry him clearly stems from the desire to rebel against a husband and a country that rejected her:

Aya pretended to have fallen in love with Russ in order to abandon Japan; or rather, she wanted to be rescued by Russ since he was so altogether different from the Japanese. (Ōba 1991, p. 90)

This strategy however, proves no more fruitful than Maria's longing for a fantasized homeland. By sacrificing her individuality to the fulfillment of the townspeople's imagination, Aya may be accepted more than Maria is; but she is

accepted only insofar as they are able to transform her into a stereotyped “geisha”-like image of Asian women. Expected to be passive and submissive, Aya escapes neither the label of “oriental” nor a role codified by gender conventions. As the title of the section dedicated to her suggests, she remains for the townspeople merely “the repairman’s wife”: she is a status rather than a person. Confined to a strange estate renamed the “Junk museum,” Aya, is a spiritual wanderer too. Like Maria, she is caught between two diverse cultures, abandoned to a liminal life even within the already marginal context of a small rural town in Alaska.

Suying’s Multiple Names and the Loss of the Self

The protagonist of the third section, Suying, is even more radical in her displacement. Daughter of a Korean woman and a Japanese man, she was not recognized as a legitimate child by her father and yet was raised like a Japanese. Unable to speak Korean and surrounded by Japanese, Suying was unaware of her mixed background until school age, when she became the target of schoolyard mockery because of her ethnicity. When her mother finally left her Japanese partner and married a Chinese man, Suying was adopted by her new father and the three moved to the U.S., where Suying later married an American. All these encounters deeply affect Suying’s sense of identity and she ends up emotionally displaced, lost in a maze of languages and customs in which even her name, ostensibly the most secure marker of identity, becomes full of ambiguity. Her Korean birth name Soyon (素英) was turned into Sue (すえ) during her childhood in Japan. Then her Chinese stepfather would pronounce the name as Suying while her husband would use any of them alternately. Finally, her friends in the States opted for the Americanized nickname of Sue. Such a multiplicity of names is incredibly difficult for Soyon-Sue-Suying, who realizes the impossibility of finding stability even in her own name.

Similarly, the constant oppressive presence of her husband has deprived Suying of a chance to develop her own personality. From the beginning the man has considered his wife a belonging rather than an individual and has manipulated her to create a wife who could match his ideal type of woman. A specialist in the field of East Asian Studies, Suying’s husband chose her because of her mixed Asian background, as if the woman’s body could represent a sort of living embodiment of his scholarly interests:

He was a scholar in East Asian history and would constantly ask me all sorts of questions about Korea, Japan and China. He was the one who forced me to take a degree in ethnomusicology. He imposed a completely unnatural and excessive consciousness as Asian on me, and built me up according to an artificial personality. Probably that man, my dead husband, chose me because he found it interesting that I am of mixed Korean and Japanese parentage and that I was raised by a Chinese. (Ōba 1991, pp. 156–157)

Victim of a process of over-categorization in which she has been forced to play so many different roles, a woman and a foreigner, Suying must accept the impossibility

of the singular self that her cultural multiplicity has imposed on her, and must opt instead for an artificial identity. The attempt to escape from her life and articulate her thoughts, however, does not prove to be decisive, for Ōba does not make clear in the end whether Suying has managed to re-assemble and re-weave the threads of her multiple selves. After spending the summer in the small Alaskan town, Suying decides to go back to the university town where she had come from and disappears from the scene as silently as she entered it.

Woman as Wanderer

As is typically the case in Ōba's stories, *The Junk Museum* does not truly resolve the questions it has posed. There is no dramatic catharsis in this story: what matters to Ōba is the process that the characters have undergone in their efforts to negotiate their identities—not the conclusion. By showing that, despite their different ways of coping with “otherness,” these three characters are equally left with the feeling of being wanderers, Ōba stresses how identity does not necessarily depend upon spatial and geographic coordinates, just as it does not depend on particular cultural assumptions. Rather than trying to locate “home,” the protagonists take journeys that are more radical as they call into question the very existence of such “home.”

Although such a process is a difficult one, Ōba makes clear that it is not without hope. For while she acknowledges the pain of “wandering” and displacement, Ōba is also aware of the positive outcomes of loss. As she makes manifestly clear in essays such as “Furōnin no tamashii” 浮浪人の魂 (A vagabond's soul)⁸ or “Kokyō sōshitsu to hōrō” 故郷喪失と放浪 (The loss of home and wandering),⁹ the post-war era is an era of exiles, of wanderers and lost homes. Although in these essays Ōba discusses primarily *social* phenomena like the voluntary dropping-out of hippies from society or the creation, in the U.S., of a community of highly-educated refugees who fled from Europe during the Second World War, she nonetheless stresses how even in the literary world such violent changes shook the establishment in a liberating and enhancing way.

Seen in this light, nomadism becomes a performative strategy through which it is possible to explore the vast possibilities of “in-between” identities while simultaneously rethinking the goal of such a quest. Putting the question in the critical terms proposed by Braidotti, nomadism is a strategy that does not pursue a clear definition of identity but, rather, advocates a completely new perspective, in which “the point is not to know who we are, but rather what, at last, we want to become.”¹⁰ Braidotti's work refers to a context and an epoch completely different from Ōba's, of course; but an affinity between the two conceptual frameworks exists, particularly with regard to the positive role of women in nomadism.

⁸ Ōba 1978, pp. 27–31.

⁹ Ōba 1973, pp. 161–77.

¹⁰ Braidotti 2002, p. 2.

Braidotti sees women as the primary agents in reshaping power dynamics in a world system dominated by transnational politics. Women's ambiguous position in culture has made it possible for them to negotiate between multiple social identities and to develop a familiarity with movement, change and subversion. For Braidotti, the mobility and displacement that characterize female experience represent an empowering chance to reconsider the dichotomy "Same-Other":

Where "figurations" of alternative feminist subjectivity [...] differ from classical "metaphors" is precisely in calling into play a sense of accountability for one's locations. They express materially embedded cartographies and as such are self-reflexive and not parasitic upon a process of metaphorization of "others." The figurations that emerge from this process act as the spotlight that illuminates aspects of one's practice which were blind spots before. By extension, a new figuration of the subject (nomadic, cyborg, black, etc.) function [sic] like conceptual *personae*. As such, it is no metaphor, but rather as [sic] cognitive maps, i.e. materially embedded and embodied accounts of one's power relations. On the creative level it expresses the rate of change, transformation or affirmative deconstruction of the power one inhabits. "Figurations" materially embodied stages of metamorphosis of a subject position towards all that the phallogocentric system does *not* want it to become.¹¹

Ōba's image of the wanderer also contains such potential. In casting a woman in this role, Ōba emphasizes the harshness and extreme marginality of living in an "in-between" space, but also allows the possibility, by rethinking women's positions and social identities, to emerge from a perspective distinct from a phallogocentric one. The close friendship between Maria and Aya outside the borders of the established community, as well as their disenchanting observations about America, Russia, and Japan provide a good example of a female alliance that tries to build up a new space to contest old models of womanhood and nationhood. Similarly, Suying's attempt to confront her inner malaise by choosing an independent life testifies to a desire not to resign herself to wifely duties.

The subversive potential of the female characters in *The Junk Museum* is further implied in the connotation of the physical space they inhabit, which is harsh and marginal and yet at the same time infused with a vibrant, hidden energy. Maria and Suying, for example, live in such close contact with animals that they become, at a certain point, metonymically associated with them. As the titles of the respective sections suggest, Maria is referred to as "The Woman of the Dogs Mansion" and Suying is the inhabitant of "The Island of Suguri," so-named for the deer she is feeding.¹² While these associations in some sense reduce the two women

¹¹Braidotti, 2004, p.133.

¹²Suguri is the name Suying gives to the small deer, but it also refers to a type of berry, the gooseberry (*Ribes uva-crispa*). In the text the name of the deer is written in katakana スグリ while the berry is written in hiragana すぐり.

to “animal” figures, heightening their outsidersness by setting up a dichotomy between “nature” and “culture,” the correlation of human and animal features also suggests a primeval totemic power rooted in nature rather than in culture.¹³

Aya, on the other hand, lives in a house by the sea, and her backyard contains an old ship that has been converted into a strange museum, where discarded articles of little value are put on display.¹⁴ As the oxymoronic name of the building implies, it is at once a depository for abandoned objects and a semi-official space meant to preserve local traditions—habits of daily life that no longer exist. Unwanted items (and individuals) that are too old, too exotic, or too strange, are gathered here and transformed into unexpected treasures.

Through the image of Maria’s house full of obsolete objects and *trouvailles*; through the remote island where Suying spends the summer with Suguri; and through the almost haunted ship filled with junk where Aya resides, Ōba creates a space which represents and discloses the protagonists’ quest for alternative spaces of self-expression.

Similarly, the flora and fauna which recur in the story mirror the characters’ ontological condition in a way that is often subtle and unexpected for the reader. Particularly intriguing, for example, is the use of moss, trees and weeds in the description of the houses of Maria and Aya. We are told that the two houses are next to each other and that they are surrounded by a variety of trees such as alders, willows, and mountain ashes. Also, in close proximity, there is a marsh where a plant known as Asian skunk cabbage grows under the shade of a large conifer of the cypress family, the *thujopsis dolabrata*. Both the marsh lily and the tree are relatively wide-spread in Japan, where they are called, respectively, *mizubashō* and *asunarō*, but they are quite rare in the West,¹⁵ which leads me to believe that Ōba chose these plants mainly for their symbolic meaning.

The *mizubashō* is particularly interesting here for a number of reasons. First, it belongs to the Araceae family, just like the *urashima* plant that Ōba will later employ as the leading metaphor in her masterpiece *Urashimasō*; its usage thus represents a continuity of imagery between Ōba’s first and second period of literary production. What is more, the *mizubashō*, like the *urashima* plant, has a massive root system stemming from a rhizome, such that many roots grow out in all directions. By a suggestive and intriguing coincidence, then, the plant that Ōba employs on numerous occasions to literalize the condition of her expatriate heroines has

¹³Ōba was fascinated by the indigenous people of Alaska, the Tlingit. Their culture, which is also mentioned in *Sanbiki no kani*, inspired her to write the story *Higusa* 火草 (Fireweed, 1969). For further reference see chapter 5 in Egusa 2001.

¹⁴Raquel Hill reads Ōba’s use of the ship in *Garakuta hakubutsukan* as a heterotopia, referring to Michel Foucault’s concept of “other spaces.” See Hill 2007.

¹⁵To be exact, the skunk cabbage that can be found from northern California to Alaska is the American variety, the *Lysichiton americanum*. The Asian skunk cabbage, *Lysichiton camtschatcensis*, is its sister species and can be found in Japan, in the Kurile Islands, and from Kamchatka peninsula to northeast Asia. It seems likely these two species evolved when Asia and North America became separated by the Bering Strait. The *Thujopsis dolabrata* is a tree native to Japan.

precisely the same type of root-system that Deleuze and Guattari choose as a symbol of nomadic subjectivity.¹⁶ However, it is worth pointing out that, unlike the *urashimasō*, the *mizubashō* is a marsh plant, and I believe it is its *amphibious* position, partly in the water and partly on the surface, that best symbolizes the “in-between” status of the characters in *The Junk Museum*.¹⁷

Moreover, the choice of such an ambiguous plant testifies to Ōba’s fascination with the imagery of weeds. The wild grass in Ōba’s works is one of the most powerful symbols in her complex system of botanical metaphors, and it is employed as a double-edged trope able to absorb multiple levels of meaning. Weeds lack the beauty of flowers; they grow in unwanted places; they may, like the *urashimasō*, be poisonous or, like the *mizubashō*, have a foul smell; and yet they are also more resistant in adverse conditions in a way that somehow parallels the protagonists’ inner strength in the face of adversity.

On an intertextual level, weeds are a metaphorical trigger for Ōba that links her works to Japanese classics, particularly the works of Heian court ladies and of premodern poets such as Saigyō and Bashō. In the collection *Yasō no yume* (*The dream of wild grass*, 1973),¹⁸ Ōba herself traces the history of her fascination with wild grasses. In the opening essay, the author recalls how modernist poetry, particularly the wasteland metaphor in the works of T. S. Eliot, attracted her attention during the war: “I felt that, in Japan after the Second World War, I had verified with my own eyes the very wasteland he had seen in the heart of Europe during the First World War.”¹⁹ However, after her American experience, Ōba was drawn back to the works of Saigyō, Bashō and Lu Xun:

While saying farewell to the back silhouette of Eliot, who seemed to despise chaos and to resign himself to God, I am still sitting amidst chaos, reciting Saigyō and Bashō, pervaded with a calm that is very much oriental, shedding tears at the memory of Lu Xun. Recently, I took the literary theory of Valery off an old bookshelf and, while reading it, I thought it was pretty good. However, his poetry did not move me. Then, when I reread Lu Xun,

¹⁶Deleuze and Guattari use the concept of nomadic thought in conjunction with the image of the rhizome. An organism that grows horizontally, spreading its roots in all directions, the rhizome symbolizes a complex system that opposes all dualisms. An open figuration, it can cross disciplines and subjects, just like the nomad, who ceaselessly moves on his journey: “A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*” (see Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari 2004, p. 27).

¹⁷Many critics have defined Ōba’s characters through another water-related metaphor, the *nenashigusa*. A common word in the Japanese language, used to describe the condition of wanderers and those who are left rootless, it is originally a botanical term that refers to duckweed, a small and free-floating flowering plant that is stemless, aquatic and only grows on the surface of still or slowly moving water.

¹⁸The title of Ōba’s collection echoes the title of Lu Xun’s collection *Ye cao* 野草 (Wild Grass), a volume of lyrical essays that Lu Xun composed between 1924 and 1926. For the English translation see Lu Xun 2003.

¹⁹Ōba 1973, p. 10.

whom I had encountered at the same time, I was violently shaken all over again and in the middle of the night I started weeping, remembering him. I would be happy if I could turn into Lu Xun's Wild Grass!²⁰

Wild grass is associated with an Asian sensibility that celebrates the cyclical nature of life and its majestic beauty, but which also treasures imperfections, forlorn spaces, and tarnished objects.²¹ The "oriental serenity" of Bashō and Saigyō and the emotional power of wild grasses that Ōba mentions in her essay, then, emerge in the counter-world of *The Junk Museum*, where the female characters try to create their alternative, third space in a land that is, literally and figuratively, desolate and abounding in weeds and moss. In the image of a plant which is clearly intended to evoke Bashō,²² we can see that Ōba's emotional link with her predecessor goes far beyond that of a simple tribute to the renowned haiku master. It is much more than that: she has turned a traditional poetic trope into a metaphor for a modern sense of displacement. The vitalistic impulse concealed beneath the simple description of wild grass suggests not only a classical motif but also a peculiar condition of Ōba's transnational characters who, as sturdy as weeds, try to break through their cultural shock by reinventing their lives from odds and ends. As Dennitza Gabrakova argues in her study on weed imagery in Lu Xun, Yosano Akiko, and Ōba Minako:

The "weeds" are a unique and tangible expression of the emotion of awakening, which takes over the content and reveals an aspect of Asian modern awakening that cannot easily be framed. This hidden aspect is precisely a texture, an organic-vegetal tissue, which, like [Eve Kosofsky] Sedgwick's interpretation of affect, comes closest to "touching feeling." "Weeds" represent the palpable side of the drive to the modern, but they also stand for the emotion toward the new and the pathos of "breaking through." "Weeds" are a dynamic sign of suppression and revulsion that best materializes the inner emotional pulsation on the borderline between the old and the new, the passive and the active, the traditional and the modern, the sleep and the awakening.²³

Classical literature is also hinted at in the image of the *asunaro* tree that recurs more than once in the story. The tree is endemic to Japan and is similar to

²⁰ Ōba 1973, p. 11.

²¹ The classical aesthetic of *sabi* is also present in Ōba's *Shishū Sabita Kotoba (A Poetry Collection of Tarnished Words)*, 1971. For the English translation see Brown 2006.

²² The *mizubashō* is also celebrated in a popular children's song, *Natsu no omoide 夏の思い出* (Summer Memories). The lyric was written by the Niigata-born Ema Shōko 江間章子, one of the few women to be active as a poet in the early twentieth century. The text of the song as follows: "When summer comes, I think of Oze under distant skies. In the mist, the gentle shadow of a path in the fields rises, marsh lilies are in bloom flowering in my dreams by the water while evening tints in azalea pink, those faraway distant skies". I am not certain that Ōba knew the song, but it seems likely, considering that its nostalgic tunes still linger in the memories of many Japanese up to the present day.

²³ Gabrakova 2007, p. 121.

the Japanese cypress (*hinoki*), but its wood is not as valuable as the actual *hinoki*. Within classical literature, it is mentioned by Sei Shōnagon in her *Pillow Book* (section 40), where it is dismissed as an ugly, rough tree, and it also appears in one of Bashō's *haibun*:

“Tomorrow I’ll become a cypress!” an old tree in a valley once said. Yesterday has passed as a dream; tomorrow has not yet come. Instead of just enjoying a cask of wine in my life, I keep saying “tomorrow, tomorrow,” securing the reproof of the sages.²⁴

The poet, who had in mind Bo Juyi’s poem *Recommending Wine*, concludes the prose with a haiku:

Sabishisa ya	Loneliness
hana no atari no	among the blossoms
asunarō	a false cypress

Bashō here plays with the pivot word *asunarō*, which means “it will become tomorrow” but also refers to the name of the tree. The *haibun* implies that even though the *asunarō* aspires to become what it is not, i.e., a *hinoki* tree, it can only dream in vain because the change will never occur. The lonely atmosphere (*sabishisa*) however, does not lack an aura of calm elegance (*sabi*) and suggests a serene resignation to the passing of time, as it emerges in another version of the same haiku:²⁵

Hi wa hana ni	With the sun darkening
kurete sabishi ya	on the blossoms, it is lonely
asunarō	a false cypress

The poet has seen the flowers glowing in the daylight and he is now overwhelmed with loneliness when, at sunset, the darkness swallows the blossoms and allows the silhouette of a false cypress to emerge. Unsure whether a new day will come for the sun to illuminate the flowers—unsure whether he himself will live to see that day—the poet can only wait with that “oriental serenity” Ōba praised so much in her *Dreams of Wild Grasses*.

Returning to *The Junk Museum*, we find the image of the *asunaro* both in the description of the area around the houses of Maria and Aya and in Suying’s story. In the former case, the tree is a landmark and, together with the alders and the marsh lilies, creates a romantic atmosphere that contrasts strikingly with the concrete-covered, densely-inhabited Tōkyō that Aya visits briefly during the narrative. In Suying’s case, the tree is related to her deer, Suguri, who is kept tied to an *asunaro* branch so that he cannot run away. Nevertheless, after Suying has left the

²⁴ Quoted in Barnhill 2005, p. 108.

²⁵ Quoted in Barnhill 2004, p. 72.

island, the deer manages to break the chain and escape into the woods. Upon hearing about the incident, Aya concludes that it is unwise to bind a wild animal against its will and suggests that the tree be cut down. Just as it is impossible for the false cypress to become an authentic one, it is impossible for Suguri to live in a cage. Similarly, the *asunaro* can be seen as a symbol of the shared condition of Maria, Aya and Suying, who, each in their own way, are unable to settle down because of their wandering nature. Perhaps, then, the fact that the tree is cut down at the story's conclusion and that a flute is carved from its wood as a memento for Suying should be read as suggesting that Suying is finally ready to deal with her position as an outsider: she is at last prepared to confront her uncertain future with the same serene yet restless curiosity that had kept alive the wandering spirit of Saigyō and Bashō.

Conclusions

In conclusion, *The Junk Museum* is one of Ōba's earliest works to problematize the role of women abroad and to frame their individual stories within a broader discourse on wifedom, motherhood, and nationhood. Particularly, Ōba's use of the female wanderer as the leading metaphor in the story testifies to the author's engagement with and interest in proposing a new role for women within a transnational as well as a domestic context.

In later works, Ōba will go on to explore these issues further, letting her characters engage with their hybrid backgrounds in less purely antagonistic terms. Crucially, the nomadic identity of these characters will become not so much an endless state of rootlessness and wandering as a necessary stage in the characters' process of homecoming. The feeling of being "in-between" will lead the characters to search for a new identity that is capable of combining different roots in a single but multilayered subjectivity, as in the case of Yukie, the main character in *Urashimasō*. In her last works, in a story like *Candle Fish (Rōsoku uo)*, Ōba will deal again with the question of identity, and will literalize the problems of gender and cultural identity with the aid of the fantastic. Through a succession of images and an array of bodily metamorphoses, the female characters in the story will overcome the limitations of gender and monoculturalism by transforming themselves into hybrid creatures who speak a fantastic lingua franca, capable of transcending the specificity of each language.

Ōba's works, then, not only demonstrate a sensitivity to issues of female identity as they were perceived through the lens of feminist discourse during the 1970s, but also anticipate a nomadic sensibility which speaks to the present era of globalization and transnational mobility. Thus, since the very beginning of her career, Ōba has suggested that both womanhood and nationhood are never neutral territories and she has acknowledged the difficulties of inhabiting gendered and culturally determined spaces while simultaneously advocating a better place for women in society, and a better society formed by women's hands.

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