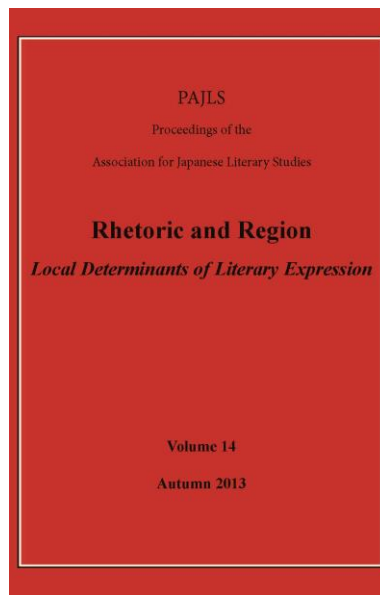


“Labor and Literature of Contemporary Japan: the  
Prescience of Hannah Arendt”

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# Labor and Literature of Contemporary Japan: The prescience of Hannah Arendt

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## Abstract

In *The Human Condition* (1958) Hannah Arendt has argued that a revolution has taken place, in the way in which mankind works to make a living, so that ‘homo faber,’ once a maker of durable things, has changed altogether into ‘animal laborens,’ a social unit in a continuous cycle of production and consumption of an immense variety of objects – food, furniture, houses, aircraft, television sets –all of which are subject to replacement. As a result, this massive self-perpetuating process, based on automation, has overwhelmed production by individual labor and the capacity for self-worth that it entails. Arendt also argues that “the things that owe their existence exclusively to man constantly condition their human makers.” Within the framework of Arendt’s observations this paper examines a new direction to be found in literary representations of the emergence of precariats in Japan, confirming Arendt’s analysis made half a century ago.

## Introduction

Echoing Karl Mark’s famous definition of “the creation of man through human labor,” Hannah Arendt has written:

The modern age has carried with it a theoretical glorification of labor and has resulted in a factual transformation of the whole of society into a laboring society. . . . Within this society, which is egalitarian because this is labor’s way of making men live together, there is no class left, no aristocracy of either a political or spiritual nature from which a restoration of the other capacities of man could start anew. Even presidents, kings, and prime ministers think of their offices in terms of a job necessary for the life of society, and among the intellectuals, only solitary individuals are left who consider what they are doing in terms of work and not in terms of making a living. What we are confronted with is the prospect of a society of laborers without labor, that is, without the only activity left to them. Surely, nothing could be worse.<sup>1</sup>

Arendt’s theme is that human beings must go beyond simply ‘making a living.’ She has stressed in this seminal book that she is proposing “nothing more than to think what we are doing.”

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<sup>1</sup> Arendt, Hannah *The Human Condition*, Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1958, 4.

This questioning is most apposite today. Commodification of labor was already a norm in nineteenth century work conditions where workers were treated like automated robots, and today human beings are actually being replaced with robots performing labor.<sup>2</sup> She also mentioned that fulfilment from the individual's point of view could only be self-defeating. By this she means that, in working to provide for their primary biological needs, the individuals at a communal level have become economic units dominated by economic imperatives and are part of an endless production process meeting the demand of consumption. Self-defeat lies in the fact that nothing is produced. The emphasis lies on the process. The glorification of labor that Hannah Arendt refers to applies at a social level but not at an individual level, whereby writers, artists, scientists, thinkers and professionals could break the spell of process by creativity.

Today Japan faces several social and economic challenges. People in the labor market compete with each other by selling their labor cheaply. Even people in permanent jobs are not safe. Because of their employment status they are expected to work and contribute excess time unpaid. The shrinking of taxpayers in the population will no doubt create problems for the government. Japan is an aging country<sup>3</sup> and its declining birth rate has been a critical issue.<sup>4</sup> When we consider the fact that the government receives less tax from the part-time sector and no tax at all from other groups, e.g. elderly and disabled people, the government will be forced to further reduce social welfare costs. The article, "Precarious Work in Japan" succinctly outlines how economic insecurity leads young people to avoid marriage and family. Particularly, social insurance benefits are only for regular workers:

It appears that declining income and uncertain employment are contributing to this rising rate of non-marriage. This is a critical factor in Japan's low birth rate. It has also contributed to growing concerns about the viability of pension and medical care in the future, as the dependency ratio (retirees per worker) is rising sharply. This fiscal situation is aggravated by the large percentage of the workforce in non-regular employment that does not pay social insurance premiums.<sup>5</sup>

Neoliberalism is a contemporary form of economic liberalism that emphasizes the efficiency of private enterprise, liberalized trade, and relatively open markets to promote

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<sup>2</sup> See the extent of a collection of groups and projects in the Robotics in Japan, [transit-port.net/lists/Robotics.Org.in.Japan.html](http://transit-port.net/lists/Robotics.Org.in.Japan.html), Accessed 28 March 2013.

<sup>3</sup> "Declining Birth Rate and Aging Population" in the Statistics Bureau Home Page says that in 2011, aged population (65 years and over) was 29.75 million, constituting 23.3 percents of the total population and marking a record high. This percentage of elderly in the population is the highest in the world. [www.stat.go.jp/english/data/handbook/c02cont.html](http://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/handbook/c02cont.html). Accessed 28 March 2013.

<sup>4</sup> BBC News, Jonathan Head, "The Japanese government says urgent policy changes are needed to persuade women to have more children," says that the population in Japan is expected to shrink more than 20% by the middle of this century. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4065647.stm>. Accessed 28 March 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Machiko Osawa, Myoung Jung Kim, and Jeff Kingston, "Precarious Work in Japan" 2012, 331-332.

globalization. Neoliberals therefore seek to maximise the role of the private sector in determining the political and economic priorities of the world. Privatisation has occurred globally, neglecting responsibility for social welfare and environmental issues. Thus, anti-globalization movements have taken root in the world since the 1990s. On April 16, 2012, *Time* magazine featured an article by Michael Schuman, “The Jobless Generation: Tens/millions of young people are unemployed. How to get them jobs before they become unemployable – and erupt in fury.” Youth unemployment statistics quoted were 50% in Spain and 8.5% in Japan.<sup>6</sup> Making a precarious living by working casually, part time, or on a temporary contract appear to have become perilously commonplace in the contemporary labor markets of the industrialized world.<sup>7</sup>

Hardship on the work front as a literary topic is not new, but how closely it is related to socio-economic changes in society is another topic. Japan’s 1920s and 30s saw the rise of proletarian literature imbued by communist ideology. The great feature in proletarian literature was a call for unity. Even though socio-politically focused themes are comparable to those found in proletarian literature in Japan in the late 1920s and the early 1930s, contemporary laborers lack the united commitment shown then to communist ideology. What is common, however, is the hardship endured by laborers on the work front in their respective societies. Dealing indirectly with contemporary social issues such as *karōshi* (death by overworking), *hikikomori* (self-imposed isolation), homeless people, *freeters*, *NEET* (not in education, employment, or training), and the working poor, these polarised literary topics have, by virtue of the range of predicaments being depicted, the potential to become a source of activism for promoting social change, as their predecessors did, though not bound together this time by a political ideology. We are now driven by the imperatives of economic efficiency in all areas of labor with their assigned workload formulas.

The contemporary authors’ technique of taking a confessional style using the first person narrative reminds us of Japan’s I-novel tradition, but again their narration lacks the deep psychological terrain that the archetypal I-novels contained. Instead, their works illustrate latent anxieties, anger, and apathy against modern societies where inequality flourishes (*kakusa shakai*) and in which they find themselves trapped. I-novels are often criticised for their concentration on the psychology and reactions of the protagonist and, consequently, their lack of social content. Thus, in a strict sense, these writers are neither proletarian writers nor I-novelists. They have extended existing literary styles into a new form. Their works confront the propensity to conform that is prevalent in Japanese society. Characteristically, the writers discussed below have made it clear that their attitudes are based upon being ‘unable to unite’ and ‘not forcing people.’<sup>8</sup> To this extent, some of them chose to remain as outsiders, and their bitter personal experiences form the basis of their literature. In this paper, I discuss first the economic forces in society leading to the

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Schuman, “The Jobless Generation,” *Time*, April 16, 2012, 18-23.

<sup>7</sup> Considering the global financial crisis of 2007-8, the state of precarity appears surprisingly common and some have claimed that paradigm shifts institutionalised by for instance Fordism are mere exceptions and precarity the rule. For details see for example Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter “Precarity as a Political Concept,” 2008.

<sup>8</sup> “Danketsu dekinu, oshitsukenu” (unable to unite, not forcing people). Cited in “Purekariāto bungaku ‘zetsubō otoko’ o shuppan” (Publishing Man in Despair, Precariat Literature), *Asahi Shinbun*, 2008.

creation of an underclass, and secondly past and contemporary works of literature dealing with this theme in the light of Hannah Arendt's observations of labor.

### Socio-economic situations

Given the fact that the government's socio-economic policies shape a labour market which affects all the people at work, the nominal Japanese writers' descriptions of contemporary work conditions, particularly of casual labourers and despatch workers (*haken*), are seen almost as a norm, e.g. long hours, no security, no promotion. In terms of exploitation by the directions taken by labour market values and measures, the new literary outputs seem at first glance to be an extension of proletarian writing in the 1930s. There is a major difference, however. The working conditions in the 1930s were deplorable, as seen in Kobayashi Takiji's *Kanikōsen* (The cannery ship, 1929), and Japan's proletarian literature in the 1930s promoted the communist ideology that was disseminated regularly among the workers. Moreover, proletarian literature was part of several cultural movements.<sup>9</sup>

The scale of Japan's economic downturn for the past two decades has produced writing that distinctly addresses the hardships that have arisen in the wage earning class. Unlike the 1920s and 30s, when communist penetration into the working force was at its height resulting in direct resistance by workers to oppressive conditions, control of the labor supply in Japan has now been lawfully organized, run perfectly and paid accordingly. The work force has now been categorized, and people legally processed in accordance with the conditions applying to their particular category. The sophistication of this modern form of control over the labor supply appears to result in a much more sinister method of exploitation than the oppression which provoked violent confrontation between the managers and the laborers in the 1930s. In Karin Amamiya's book, *Ikisasero! Nan'minka suru wakamono-tachi*<sup>10</sup> (Make us live: the displacement of young people! 2007), the activist suggests that young freeters and casual workers do not understand what drove them into such a desperate situation and thus they often blame themselves for being non-competitive, *jiko-sekinin* (self-responsibility), in a market that is based on promoting high efficiency and profit within the framework of a democracy.<sup>11</sup> Because of her commitment and dedication, she has been a public figure representing different kinds of disenfranchised communities that exist in Japan.

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<sup>9</sup> See Mats Karlsson's article "United Front from Below: The Proletarian Cultural Movement's Last Stand," 1931-34, *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 2, Winter 2011, 29-59.

<sup>10</sup> Amamiya Karin, *Ikisasero! Nanmin'ka suru wakamono-tachi* (Make us live! The displacement of young people), Ôta shuppan, 2007. Amamiya expresses her determination as "a declaration of war against Japanese society" and continues her activities of interviewing and writing on this theme until society changes for the better. Because of her commitment and dedication to this issue, she has become a public figure in the media.

<sup>11</sup> This is similar to the workers back in the 1930s but with the difference that contemporary discourse suggests the existence of a Japanese sense of *jiko-sekinin* or self-responsibility as powerful deflection to the state accountability. For detailed examples of the *jiko-sekinin* debate, see, for example, Miriam Silverberg "War Responsibility Revisited: Auschwitz in Japan" in *Japan Focus*, 2007.

This social aspect can now be found in the deeper and more significant shifts in understanding that are realized and expressed in symbolic form in art and literature. It is not surprising how consciously the new writers write about a contemporary work environment that impacts on people. Such eye-catching book titles as the non-fictional *Wakamono o migoroshi ni suru kuni*<sup>12</sup> (The nation abandoning its youth, 2011), *Zetsubō otoko*<sup>13</sup> (Man in despair, 2012) and the fictitious I-novel style of *Kueki ressha* (Hereafter: Labor train, 2011) all echo the misery that the authors have found in themselves and the necessity of social reform. These works profile contemporary youth, whose social status has become that of the casual laborer with no career trajectory. Depicting their monotonous working life with no future, these writers have succeeded in making a realistic impact on their readers. In Amamiya's case, through media and electronic technology, such as Facebook, Youtube, and Twitter, she has taken an activist role in arguing that their social condition of malaise is not altogether of their own making, but has been caused by a politically engineered economic structure. Thus the writing coming from this marginalised group is gaining at least some awareness in Japanese society as a whole.

### **Life of the precariat depicted in literature**

I would like to discuss two prominent fiction writers, Nishimura Kenta and Okazaki Yoshihisa, who successfully depicted the life of the precariat in Japan. In order to place these two in a literary historical perspective that is related to labor themes, I will also discuss two former novelists, Kobayashi Takiji who was writing in the 1920s and 30s, and Nakagami Kenji whose work came much later in the 1980s. These four Japanese writers have all reacted to the economic pressures emerging in their times, leading directly to job insecurity, inequality, and isolation. In discussing the particular way in which socially-focused literature can have an impact in society itself, David Inglis has pointed out that, most twentieth-century thinkers in the Marxist tradition regard artworks as not containing direct expressions of the 'economic base' of a society or of 'dominant ideologies,' but instead artworks express indirect and mediated relations between 'material,' 'ideological,' and 'artistic' factors.<sup>14</sup> And indeed Nishimura and Okazaki do not advocate social reform through anti-government or anti-globalisation protests in their writing. Their literary outputs relate to the predicament of the young who are alienated in society by poverty and lack of human relationships.

### **Kobayashi Takiji (1903-1933)**

Hirokazu Toeda has analysed the reasons for the boom in sales from 2008 onwards of *Kanikōsen* by Kobayashi Takiji. Toeda saw the reason for the novel's immediate popularity as lying in media

<sup>12</sup> Akagi Tomohiro, *Wakamono o migoroshi ni suru kuni* (The nation undermining its youth), (Asahi Shinbun Shuppan, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Shirai Masami, *Zetsubō otoko* (Tokyo: Sankuchuari Shuppan, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> *The Sociology of Art, Ways of Seeing*, 14.

reviews and publishers' advertisements, where catch phrases caught the public's attention, for example "[A] masterpiece depicting the harsh labour environment born again in the 'gap-widening society' of the Heisei period!" and "*Kanikōsen* – Sad reminder, lamenting disparity, young people's empathy."<sup>15</sup> *The Guardian* reported that half a million copies of *Kanikōsen* were sold in 2008.<sup>16</sup> The huge sale of this classic novel of proletarian literature nearly 70 years after it was first published indicates that Japan's modern-day working poor people feel that they are part of the same kind of exploitation that the fishing crew experienced in the story.

*Kanikōsen* is a statement of how harshly workers were exploited and the corruption of those in authority, including the army and government officials. The well-known opening sentence is "We're on our way to hell, mate!" and the workers' space in the ship is called "a shit pot," where they were treated like animals. The workers were a mixed group of seasonal laborers, young boys from the slums, 'farmer fishermen' and ex-students. In the story Takiji included their previous work experiences, such as at mining pits and factories, in order to stress other areas of employment where mistreatment took place.

On the ship, the workers were made to compete in productivity output between the crew, the fishermen, and cannery hands. The superintendent offered prizes to the winning side, and at the same time he posted a notice for the least productive member, saying that a red-hot poker would be applied to the man's body. The workers rebelled in the end, but their strike ended in defeat. When the Imperial Destroyer approached the ship, ironically the workers first thought that it came to rescue them. Instead, it came to subdue them. They were betrayed; the power of the state had overwhelmed them:

You know, it's just dawned on me – we've got no allies but ourselves. 'An imperial warship.' Sounds good, doesn't it? But it was nothing but a pawn of the rich. An ally of the people? Don't make me laugh. That's a lot of bunk!<sup>17</sup>

The navy arrested their nine representatives. Those who remained were worked almost to death. Nonetheless, in the final scene they planned to rise up again in a new strategy where all joined together to make a united demand. This time the workers were successful, and the cruel supervisor was arrested and jailed. In a critical article, "Takiji and the security system of the time," Ogino Fujio asserted that the situation then is still relevant and applicable to this day.<sup>18</sup> He referred to Takiji's saying – "War is an invasion of violence externally and at the same time it inevitably creates internally a reactionary horror government." *Kanikōsen* presents a microcosmic power relationship between those with authority and those exploited. It goes beyond taking class conflict as a theme, hinting further at the existence of fascism in Japan.

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<sup>15</sup> Toeda Hirokazu, "The *Kanikōsen*: Boom – Reflecting Present Day Suffocation," 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Frank Motofuji, (trans.), *The Factory Ship and the Absentee Landlord* Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1973.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>18</sup> *Report of 2008 Kobayashi Takiji Memorial Symposium at Oxford*, Body, Region and education from Takiji's point of view, Otaru: Otaru University of Commerce Press, 2009.

Precarity today is obviously not treated in the same way as the crew were in the story, but the social impasse that they find themselves in is similar. In contrast to the boat workers, in Takiji's story the disenfranchised laborers blame themselves for not being able to be in the mainstream of the work force due to their inability and inadequacy.

Placed in its literary historical context, *Kanikōsen* served the aim of promulgating communism among the factory workers. Using ingenuity, communists took a new path by promoting socialism in an art form at the labor front, such as in factories. Under the guise of art movements the communists could avoid being arrested by police. At the same time they could deeply involve themselves in re-educating the workers. Although proletarian literature was short lived, it produced good writers, whose narrative technique consisted in actions unfolding one event after another, holding the reader's interest until the end of the story. *Kanikōsen* has also detailed descriptions of how violent the sea could be:

“The ‘rabbits’ are going to jump! The ‘rabbits’!” Someone was running along the starboard side, shouting. His words were whipped away by the violent wind, reduced to an unintelligible shout. The entire surface of the ocean was now peaked with flying white caps, leaping like rabbits in a vast prairie. This was the harbinger of a Kamchatka squall.<sup>19</sup>

This type of narrative depicting the violence of nature as a background of labourers on board is artistic and far more than prosaic reportage. Embedded in the artistic themes of *Kanikōsen* is an activist's conviction for the need of social reform. Takiji presents modernity in Japanese literature by describing workers' plights in the social context of the time.

### **Nishimura Kenta (b. 1967)**

Nishimura Kenta was awarded the 2011 Akutagawa Prize for his narrative *Labor train*. He was born in 1967 and came of age at the height of the bubble economy. He left school early and entered the work force in the early eighties, a reality that is reflected in the era of the story. He openly admits that *Labor train* is autobiographical dealing with the time of his youth when he was a day laborer at a warehouse. Among this new group of writers he deliberately set himself apart by following the I-novel tradition as his personal style. He praised the works of a few novelists who succeeded in writing about their own 'shame' as if it were somebody else's, particularly Fujisawa Seizō's works. Fujisawa, 1889-1932, spent his life as a laborer. He was mentally ill and was found dead in Shiba Park on a cold night. Seizō was encouraged at times by Tokuda Shūsei and Mikami Otokichi to gain a job and publish his works, for example *Nezu gongen ura* (At the back of the Nezu shrine, 1922), in which his friend's miserable death was featured. His works depict the suffering of poor people with sympathy, similar to the empathy shown by Dostoevsky. The protagonist in Nishimura's *Labor train*, has a strong sense of self-consciousness. He admits and embraces his shameful actions as they happen without blaming society and people around him.

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<sup>19</sup> Motofuji, 58.



This aspect is similar to Okazaki's protagonist in *Byōsoku 10 senchi no ettō* (Wintering at the speed of ten centimetres per second), which I will discuss later in this paper. Both authors subscribe to the *jiko-sekinin* (self-responsibility) ideology and portray the painful debilitating force of self-doubt in their fiction.<sup>20</sup> This stands in contrast to activist writers, such as Amamiya, who recognise the socio-political dimension hidden behind the veil of *jiko-sekinin* rhetoric. Indeed, it is Prime Minister Koizumi (2001-2006) who promoted the idea of self-responsibility as a way of shifting the government's responsibility for workers' safety and security to individuals and families themselves, in order to stimulate Japan's economy in the early twenty-first century.<sup>21</sup>

*Labor train* itself is about the portrait of a young man with no future. The protagonist, Kanta, a nineteen-year-old day laborer, is based on the author's self-image, which is destructive, foolish, and isolated. Kanta is fully aware of his uncontrollable nature and dismayed about it. Yet, as in the author's comments about himself, the protagonist, too, desires to write an I-novel. This is the only positive aspect in the story, which still has a strong note of desolation at the end:

Kanta is still a laborer without a future or purpose, but he always keeps a copy of Fujisawa Seizō's work in his hip pocket. He does not contact anyone, and no one contacts him.<sup>22</sup>

The protagonist's sad and disastrous background—his father was gaoled for having committed a sex crime; his family was broken apart; he left home at the age of 15; his education level was low; and finally he became addicted early to alcoholism – all these semi-autobiographical factors made the author's prestigious winning of the prize even more popular. Nishimura's honest and reflective observation of himself exists between the lines, for example, how Kanta admitted that he took a false step in life by taking the easy path of being a day laborer at the beginning.

Obviously there was no future in just shifting 30 kg packages of frozen food one by one on to a pallet. Kanta also admitted that he was too lazy to change his attitude. The life style that is depicted here shocks us with how hard that labor was and with no security. The protagonist lives precariously every day and he is fully aware of what he is repeatedly doing. The author projects the protagonist's self-torment and envy, but without self-pity. Kanta felt that other people belong to a common and fortunate group of human beings who can steadily walk on the royal road of life, whereas he has no other way than to earn 5500 yen a day to keep himself alive:

When he thinks that his life would run to the end as a laborer, while being eaten away by a demeaning envy that stemmed from an oversized inferiority complex, he could not but feel his life was filled with nothing but toil that was in itself wretched and suffocating.<sup>23</sup>

While Nishimura attempted to write in the archetypal I-novel tradition engulfed by highly

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<sup>20</sup> Jeff Kingston, *Contemporary Japan: History, Politics, and Social Change since the 1980s*, 84.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 17, 83-84.

<sup>22</sup> Nishimura, "Kueki ressha," *Bungei Shunjū*, Mar 2011, 493.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 490

stylised genre conventions, he also wrote about the real and depressing gap between the wealthy and the working poor in Japanese society, which is nowadays contextualised by the hackneyed phrase *kakusa shakai*. However, the protagonist's desperately lonely life style is in fact of his own making. There was an opportunity for Kanta to get out of such a situation by getting a fork lift driver's license, but he lacked motivation, whereas his friend, Kusakabe succeeded in his aims, finding much better work in the postal services. The author reveals all of Kanta's negative sides, such as anger, envy, and laziness without reservation as if vivisectioning Kanta's psychology, which also reflects the influence of the traditional I-novel style of narration espoused by his mentor, Fujisawa Seizō. In modern times, the idea of employment opportunities carries more with it than monetary gain. It also contains aspirations for personal development and the ability to contribute to society. In reality Nishimura rebuilt himself, becoming a promising writer. Without his commitment to creative writing he would have remained a laborer.

### **Nakagami Kenji (1946-1992)**

The relationship between labor and creativity is taken up in a highly individual way in Nakagami Kenji's writing.<sup>24</sup> In early life the author worked as a fork lift driver at Haneda Airport handling cargo, so he too knew the hardship of such labor. In his novels and essays Nakagami turned his experience of labor into a fusion of body and mind:

The object, the cargo, exists here in front of me. I touch it, lift it up, and move it. What we call the archetype of labor may be described as a rapport or communication between people and objects. It becomes a physical ecstasy. We exist in front of the object, and we realize that we ourselves exist as an object likewise.<sup>25</sup>

This unusual perception of fusion is echoed in Nakagami's fiction *Karekinada*, where the protagonist Akiyuki felt that while he was working as a laborer the sun-soaked landscape was like music. In Eve Zimmerman's words, "Nakagami breaks through Akiyuki's tortured deliberations about himself, in which he attempts to read himself through the tangled, metaphoric relations that exist in his family. Instead, his work suspends him in a realm of pure sensation."<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, Nishimura's depictions of Kanta's labor have no such realization of unity in work, but rather indulge in a sense of I-novelistic shame throughout. There are two contrasting receptions: Nakagami illustrates Arendt's biological idea of man as fabricator, even while doing monotonous work, and Nishimura of the infinite treadmill of the production process.

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<sup>24</sup> Nakagami Kenji (1946-1992) was born in Shingū, Wakayama prefecture in 1946. He was a descendant of 'burakumin,' Japan's stigmatised and discriminated against social class. His novels feature stories of 'burakumin,' e.g., *The Cape*, which won the Akutagawa Prize in 1975.

<sup>25</sup> Nakagami Kenji, "Sakka to nikutai" in *Nakagami Kenji zenshū*, vol. 14, 200.

<sup>26</sup> Eve Zimmerman, "In The Trap of Words: Nakagami Kenji and The Making of Degenerate of Fictions," in Stephen Snyder and Philip Gabriel (ed.), *Ōe and beyond: Fiction in Contemporary Japan*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999, 130-152.

### Okazaki Yoshihisa (b. 1968)

Okazaki Yoshihisa is contemporary to Nishimura Kenta. Unlike Nishimura, Okazaki is a Waseda University graduate who majored in literature. In 1997 he received the 40<sup>th</sup> Gunzō New Talent Literature Award for his book entitled *Byōsoku 10 senchi no ettō* (Wintering at the speed of ten centimetres per second). One of the selection members, Ri Kaisei commented that “the author was narrating the life of a ‘defeated’ protagonist and his ‘relationships’ with others, using a plain style without pretence. He succeeded in freshly depicting a kind of youth that is present today, and the book is written with touches of satire and resistance.”<sup>27</sup> Ri emphasizes the words “defeated” and “relationships” to imply the author’s social criticism written with both detachment and satire. Also commenting on this book, the critic Karatani Kōjin took a different perspective, seeing it as a story depicting the life of a laboring freeter on the edge of becoming homeless while maintaining a carefree nonchalance.<sup>28</sup>

In Okazaki’s novel, the protagonist, Tanaka Shōichi, worked for six months in winter standing along a conveyer belt to put books in order into a box every 10 seconds for 8 to 13 hours, six days a week with a short break for lunch and tea. There is, however, one moment of human relationships possibly developing when he saw a girl working in the same conditions. Almost predictably, their relationship quickly died away: “the unfruitful love was sealed up tightly.” He did, however, follow her advice that he should attempt to apply for an Arts School scholarship. It was indeed his dream of studying painting that helped him to endure the severe conditions. He succeeded in getting the scholarship, and when that happened he left his job.

The protagonist’s defiant and realistic attitude is clearly seen in the opening passage, in which he acknowledges without any self-pity that he is a loser and will never be victorious in life. He simply walked out of the building where he worked without a formal resignation letter. He said “I am no good at processing work.” Ironically, after numerous applications for a new job he ended up again with the work that he hated most, “processing work.” His wages were paid weekly and he acknowledged to himself that he had fallen into the category of a laborer. Under such wretched conditions, Tanaka was overwhelmed at being trapped in such a way that he became totally conditioned towards a precarious unstable lifestyle amidst the working class, reaching a point where, whenever he heard the supervisor’s voice say ‘lunch’ he was immediately reminded of Ivan Pavlov’s theory of the ‘conditioned reflex’ demonstrated by a dog’s associating the ringing of a bell with food. His realization of being trapped prompted him to pursue his interest in painting. When he received the scholarship he blessed his good fortune which brought with it a sign that he had triumphed over the grind and misery of his past life: “I will step out into new days with your farewell gift of disappointment that you were unable to beat me.”<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Ri Kaisei’s commendation for Okazaki’s winning of the Gunzō Shinjin Bungakushō (Gunzō New Talent Prize), June 1997.

<sup>28</sup> Karatani Kōjin’s commendation for Okazaki’s winning of the 40<sup>th</sup> Gunzō Shinjin Bungakushō, *Gunzō*, June 1997.

<sup>29</sup> Okazaki Yoshihisa, *Byōsoku 10 senchi no ettō* (Wintering at the speed of ten centimetres per second), Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1997, 164.

We can now draw together some common features to be found in the writings of Okazaki and Nishimura. First, while caught in their dispiriting labor and seemingly with no possibility of escape, both protagonists still kept personal aims, such as ‘going to the art school’ or ‘reading a book by Fujisawa,’ no matter how dreary their lives were. This aspect highlights a certain escapist ‘optimism’ that was similar to the delineation of the vision of a better future through the communist revolution evident in the 1930s proletariat literature. Labor ideology today espouses freedom to choose and express oneself. Similarly, Nakagami Kenji also drew for his subject matter during his days of labor at Haneda Airport as a cargo handler. While recognizing that in this monotonous work he felt himself becoming ‘*mono*’, an object,<sup>30</sup> the idea of ‘object’ in his work, of which he himself was one, led him to psychological feelings of unity in the rhythm of the work. In comparison, Okazaki’s short story entitled “Kodoku no michikake” (The waxing and waning of loneliness) is another example of the precariat’s life style. The protagonist, only known as ‘I,’ is 30 years old, and he feels neither old nor young. He works alone as a warehouse keeper, keeping a record of goods and dispensing them on request. The office people all work on the floor above. He likes such menial work partly because he has the freedom to be on his own and the company he works for has a policy of only working during office hours. He has compromised himself in this situation even though the pay is very low. The daily routine of his life is aimless:

In those days, I occasionally felt that I had become a kind of taxi driver. I did all things without mistake, such as choosing the line, watching the signals, paying attention to pedestrians, turning the handle according to the curve, but I couldn’t feel that I was heading anywhere. I felt that I was simply driving forward on the orders of someone sitting in the backseat. Above all, I didn’t know the destination or where it was.<sup>31</sup>

He claimed that he didn’t give up on himself, although that was the impression he gave from the way he behaved. He also felt that society resembled the numerous pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. One could not call him hopeful or ambitious, but at least he volunteered to analyse what consists of loneliness while he idled away his office time:

1. A lone person wanting to be with someone whoever it is.
2. A lone person enjoying remaining aloof from others.
3. Feeling isolated among the people who don’t understand him.
4. Feeling scared of being alone.<sup>32</sup>

From these conditions, he was able to arrive at his own definition, which was that loneliness can be hell when one wants to be associated with others, and a utopia when one wants to be isolated

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<sup>30</sup> Nakagami Kenji, “Sakka to nikutai,” in *Nakagami Kenji zenshū*, vol. 14, 200.

<sup>31</sup> Okazaki Yoshihisa, “Kodoku no michikake” (The waxing and waning of loneliness), in *Rakuten’ya*, Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2000, 85.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 88-89.

from others. The narrator's non-committed feelings are the most remarkable aspect of his personality. One day he met a school friend who invited him to participate in a new work project. Both men were excited by the prospects that it might have, but the project failed to go ahead. After that, and without noticing, the narrator 'I' gradually became further and further distant from his work, although he managed it to perfection. He rejected the managing director's kind offering to improve his work prospects, including a pay increase, and instead decided on the position from which he could walk out.

The portrait of this young man presents his complex, apathetic personality filled with resignation. To me, this kind of aimlessness points to the heart of today's social ills. Okazaki has succeeded in creating a devastating image of young workers losing all vision for the future in their lives. On the other hand, both he and Nishimura have taken up paths within the social framework instead of being alienated from it.

## Conclusion

It is still too early to say whether the narratives of disenfranchisement and precarity discussed in this paper by arguably a new generation of fiction writers who deal with the contradictions of self-responsibility versus activism may ever come together to form a coherent literary trend. What is clear is that the common theme of their writings is to depict the hopelessness and malaise that has invaded the lives of people who have the misfortune to experience the reality of precarity as the dominant status quo in contemporary Japanese society. Characters in the novels are representative of the large numbers of day-laborers and temporary employees who have joined together to form, in effect, a global precariat comprising workers of all ages. Instantaneously they may become redundant when a company moves offshore or engages in a wholesale reduction of jobs as an efficiency measure. For those working on contracts, the threat of redundancy is ever-present. It is this general unease that has found its way into novels such as *Labour train* and *Wintering at the speed of ten centimetres per second*, making them socially significant. These two novels are indicative fragments.

The existing literature on this topic shows different perspectives. The tone in Nakagami Kenji's work is creative and positive, so that social advocacy for the emancipation of *buraku* people is caught up in the wider spectrum of his art. Takiji's *Kanikōsen* is of a similar kind. In contrast, the activist stance of Karin Amamiya focuses directly on social criticism aiming at social reform. Different again is Nishimura's insistence on using Japan's I-novel tradition, indicating that it is only this form that allows him to express the truth of his feelings, an amalgam of anger, shame, aspirations, and defeat.

In both fiction and non-fiction, these authors are concerned with the human condition in society. This can be measured by Hannah Arendt's thesis of 'labor and work' whereby workers become units in a never-ending cycle of production and consumption. Arendt acknowledges that artists are not part of this automatic cycle, but are driven by their own creative visions. In this vein Nakagami's legacy continues in the cultural activities at Kumano University, which he founded in

1990, and at Otaru University of Commerce, where Takiji graduated. At the University in Otaru there is a Takiji Library, active not only for providing information but also sponsoring publications, international symposia, and the making of the film *The Cannery Ship* (released in 2005)<sup>33</sup> – a testimony to Hippocrates' dictum, *ars longa, vita brevis*.

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<sup>33</sup> Norma Field, "Commercial Appetite and Human Need: The Accidental and Fated Revival of Kobayashi Takiji's *Cannery Ship*," 2009.

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