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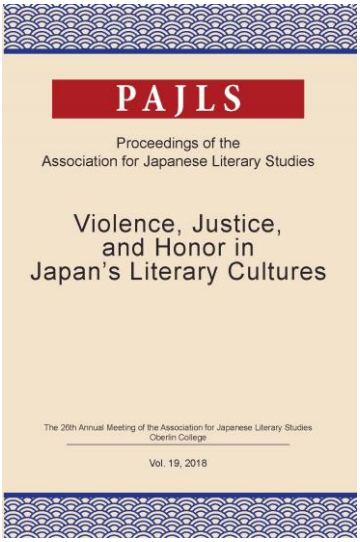

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SHATTERING THE INNOCENCE NARRATIVE: DEPICTIONS OF VIOLENCE IN PROLETARIAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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Violence pervaded the lives of lower-class children in the early decades of Japan's twentieth century. Japan's proletarian movement of the 1920s and 1930s recognized that the nature and forms of this violence were many, but the movement's acknowledgment of proletarian childhood as a period of life marred with violence diverged with the era's dominant narrative about the untouched innocence of all childhood. The early decades of the twentieth century were a period much-celebrated for the discovery of childhood as a time of purity and unfettered imagination, a Romanticism captivated by the child figure that spurred the creation of a rich children's culture which drew the participation of the most illustrious writers and artists of the day.

As this child-centered terrain of literary production took hold and expanded quickly to the highbrow and the popular masses in the second and third decade of the twentieth century, the proletarian movement was the first not just to recognize the violence in working-class children's lives but also to address working-class children directly as an audience. In addressing such children, violence was a theme they acknowledged and engaged with over and over again, shattering the romantic notion of children's innocence. My goal in this paper is to consider the proletarian movement's depiction of violence in children's lives, through a brief examination of two representative works of the early proletarian movement. I will first examine "Hell" (Jigoku, 1928) by Kaji Wataru (1903–1982), a story that critiques and exposes the commonplace misapprehension of lower-class children as violent criminals in the making. The second story I discuss is "A Cricket's Death" (Kōrogi no shi, 1929), the surprising fable by Murayama Kazuko (1903–1946) that presents a condensed lesson in structural violence within a nexus of classed social relations. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of a poem written by a rural schoolboy in the 1930s on the pervasive and underpinning presence of violence in everyday life.

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PERVASIVE VIOLENCE IN PROLETARIAN CHILDREN'S CULTURE

It may come as no surprise that portrayals of violence abound in proletarian children's culture. Examples of the physical brutality that laborers were subjected to, confrontations between striking workers and local authorities, suggestions of police torture, and the low-grade, continual violence of numerous material and psychic deprivations can be seen in the stories, songs, poems, and art of the proletarian children's literature movement. In an essay published in 1932 in *Women's Battleflag* (*Fujin senki*), Tsuboi Sakae (1899–1967), the well-known novelist who later gained fame for her postwar 1952 novel *Twenty Four Eyes* describes the ways that the children who came to her proletarian day care center in the 1930s were already immersed in the violence surrounding the political activities of their families. She details the way they witnessed their family members being arrested and taken away, or how they served as watchmen and relay messengers in dangerous situations where adults could not. Still others learned to mislead and divert the attention of the police who came to search their homes in the middle of the night, accompanied their parents to visit their family members in jail, or appealed to the authorities for their parents' release.[2]

In such accounts, we see children not only as witnesses to violence perpetrated on themselves and others, but also as agents of that violence against their class enemies, a form of response at times encouraged by the movement as a means for children to express resistance and self-affirmation. For contemporary readers and critics, it was surely such routine depictions of violence that proved to be the most alienating aspects of the genre, exposing the vast divide between experiences of childhood of the middle classes versus that of the lower and working classes. Doubly distasteful in mainstream critics' views was the way in which the movement portrayed children not only as victims, but as agents of violent action and the way that such action was recognized as legitimate, and even desirable, responses to the injustice in their lives. Controversies surrounding the inclusion of violence in children's stories themselves signal the degree of aversion to looking closely at the reality of poor children in early twentieth century Japan.

MAKING VIOLENCE VISIBLE

Making these common instances of violence visible was crucial to the work of advocating for working class children and declaring their need for specific protections. Recognizing the many forms of violence, perpetrated

[2] Tsuboi Sakae, "Pioniru yo! Tomoni," *Hataraku fujin*, September/October 1932.

not just in the form of physical harm, but through institutionalized violence extending over long spans of time is particularly critical in the case of children, who are most susceptible to their environment during their formative years. To make claims about the existence of this latter structural form of violence required not just the acknowledgment that children belong to a special category and have different needs and rights than adults, but that the deprivation of such needs is itself a form of violence.

The fact that wider public recognition of these forms of violence was required as the basic foundation for advocating for proletarian children made the issue of its visibility a potent theme to which writers returned to again and again. Just as coming to class consciousness required a worker to see oneself within a larger set of unjust social relations, recognizing the proletarian child as *child* required the ability to see the child's vulnerabilities within their lived social landscape. It makes sense, then, that these narratives were deeply concerned with the visibility (or invisibility) of violence in the lives of children, whether it be in the display of a physically harmed body, or the discernibility of a logic of causality, or the perceptibility of prejudices that perpetuated structural violence. As I examine the two stories, I will keep in mind the two poles of seen and unseen violence, and how each works to sustain or disrupt the perpetuation of such cruelty.

RECASTING THE AGGRESSORS – "HELL" BY KAJI WATARU

Kaji Wataru's "Hell" appeared in *Proletarian Arts*, before the creation of a stand-alone proletarian serial intended explicitly for young readers. The main protagonist of "Hell" is a spirited young orphan named Shōichi who lives with a hot-headed "boss" who forces him to go out and beg each day in exchange for shelter. From the story's first few opening lines, Kaji highlights how Shōichi is met with threats of violence everywhere he turns because he is visible to others only as a delinquent or target of scorn. As a beggar child, Shōichi was an unwanted presence everywhere he went: from the shrill screams of the broom-brandishing maids employed at large mansions, to the saber-carrying policemen who shout at him to disappear, to the stones thrown at him by other school children, they all reject his presence. The vivid details of the freezing weather that Kaji lingers on describe the ways that the weather itself launches an assault, one worsened by Shōichi's lack of proper shoes to protect his sorely chapped feet.

Shōichi is met with threats and attacks everywhere he turns from those who see him as a social outcast. Even when he has done nothing, he is subject to unfair vilification when he finds himself outside the home of a wealthy man, peering into the home from the cold outside:

> "Ma'am! Over here! Give me some, too! I'm starving! Hey!" Shōichi's hand inadvertently reached out and landed directly on the window. Everyone turned to look over.
>
> "It's a thief!"
>
> "A thief! An armed robber!"
>
> "Daddy! I'm scared!" One of the girls erupted in tears. Within moments, the bald man appeared with a gun in his hand.[3]

That his hunger and longing are instantly perceived and interpreted as aggression by the wealthy family in the house suggests the prejudice and discrimination that shape his daily existence.

The story goes on to follow Shōichi as he meets a fellow orphan, a young Korean girl named Kyō-chan who is looking for her father, a miner. In search of him, they go to a mining site, owned and run by the very "bald man" who appeared earlier with a gun in the scene above. There, they observe the brutal working conditions of the Korean laborers and eventually find themselves in jail, after being chased by the police for throwing a stone at the mine owner. In jail, they meet a socialist who takes them under his wing. The story ends with the children promising to join him and others in the socialist struggle.

"Hell" problematizes Shōichi's social visibility as an agent of aggression, and instead unveils the violence pervading his and Kyō-chan's lived circumstances. Like many proletarian narratives for children, Kaji's story acknowledges children's emotions, and articulates a vision of children in which they are allowed to be angry, rebellious, and show aggression toward others in society who victimize them. While there is a gendered aspect to the characterization, in which Kyō-chan never really expresses anger or aggression, the story nonetheless provided a depiction whereby young readers could see their own frustrations and sense of justice affirmed. It was in these fictional narratives (unlike in life) that children were allowed to rail at the injustice everywhere around them: to be angry and rebellious against landlords, policemen, schoolteachers, and their young bourgeois peers.

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[3] Kaji Wataru, "Hell," translated by Mika Endo, in *For Dignity, Justice, and Revolution: An Anthology of Japanese Proletarian Literature* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 195.

UNVEILING CAUSALITY – "THE CRICKET'S DEATH" BY MURAYAMA KAZUKO

I turn now to the story by Murayama Kazuko, "The Cricket's Death." Kazuko was a fascinating figure who was an established and recognized children's writer published in many popular children's magazines of her day and who also served as editor of Japan's only proletarian children's magazine, *Children's Battleflag* (*Shōnen senki*). She made a living by writing stories for mainstream children's magazines like *Children's Friend (Kodomo no tomo*) or *Children's Land (Kodomo no kuni*). Her stories were often accompanied by the artwork of her husband, Murayama Tomoyoshi (1901–1977), who was well known as a writer, playwright, and director active in the modernist art and proletarian cultural movements. Originally appearing in *Children's Battleflag* in September 1929, "The Cricket's Death" is a bleak fable of a laborer's death in which the morbid register is refracted through the use of insects as characters.

The story begins with a laborer cricket, recently fired from his job at the printing factory after his injury from a heavy typesetting tray falling on his foot. Unable to find new work, he wanders the streets shivering until an unseen bucketful of icy cold water falls on his head from above and he passes out unconscious on the street. The cricket wakes to find himself in the hospital, and confesses that he is unable to pay for his medical care, upon which the unsympathetic hospital director bee pushes the cricket out onto the street, leading to the eventual death of the ill cricket in the bitter cold.

From there, the story follows the actions of the hospital director bee, his disregard for his own employees, the other employee's divestment from their own work, and the hypocrisy of his Salvation Army charity activities. Furthermore, when the bee is shown furtively racing off to meet the wealthy bell-cricket mistress to whom he pays a house call to hand-deliver medicine, we see the bee no longer as the callous, insensitive hospital director, but an unctuous servant. In this context, he is in a position of subservience. The structure of Kazuko's narrative allows young readers to see the villain from varied perspectives, providing insight into the nexus of social relations in which villainy exists.

We later learn through a conversation between the bee and the mistress that she was the one who had thrown the water out of the window that had originally knocked the bee unconscious. Her response, which is merely to laugh and find humor in the coincidence of her being connected to the bee by way of some inconsequential laborer, teaches its young readers how the violence of the cricket's killing is set in motion by the unthinking actions of an individual far removed from the cricket's position

in society and underscores the casualness and the thoughtlessness with which brutality is perpetrated upon society's weak. Through this stark insect fable, Kazuko makes visible the structural violence operating at the intersection of class, medical care, and workplace vulnerability in a manner intelligible to young readers.

CONCLUSION

I conclude by turning to a poem written by a working-class child of the 1930s. It is one of the most famous pieces that emerged from the pedagogical practices of the *seikatsu tsuzurikata* (daily life writing) movement, a grassroots teachers movement promoting writing education in which children wrote about what they saw and felt from their own daily life experiences. *Seikatsu tsuzurikata* took on political overtones in the landscape of 1920s and 1930s Japan, particularly in places of poverty where it was viewed to be the only way that conscientious teachers could engage with children's lived realities in the classroom setting. Many of the teachers were sympathetic with the proletarian movement, although any direct involvement would have been impossible for them because their status as public employees prohibited them from involvement in political activities. It has also been widely documented that teachers involved in the *seikatsu tsuzurikata* movement were targeted by the High Police and arrested, tortured, and forced to recant in much the same ways that proletarian activists were.

When I recently revisited this poem for a translation class, I was reminded of how it ruminates on the issue of violence from the perspective of a young farmer. Reading it over, I realized that it contained something important to add to this discussion of violence and its visibility in children's lives: the recognition not just of its presence and pervasiveness, but our common complicity with the various forms of violence at work under our very noses. Its author, Ōzeki Matsusaburō (1926–1944), was 12 or 13 at the time he wrote it in the late 1930s in rural Niigata, just as Japan's wartime mobilization was heating up. The Japanese title, "Mushikera" which can be translated as "insects," "pests," or "critters," is a term in Japanese that might invite scorn but in the case of this boy, is a term of affection. Here is the Japanese poem in full:

『虫けら』　　大関松三郎
一くわ
どっしんとおろして　ひっくりかえした土の中から
もぞもぞと　いろんな虫けらがでてくる
土の中にかくれていて

あんきにくらしていた虫けらが
おれの一くわで　たちまち大さわぎだ
おまえは　くそ虫といわれ
おまえは　みみずといわれ
おまえは　へっこき虫といわれ
おまえは　げじげじといわれ
おまえは　ありごといわれ
おまえらは　虫けらといわれ
おれは　人間といわれ
おれは　百姓といわれ
おれは　くわをもって　土をたがやさねばならん
おれは　おまえたちのうちをこわさねばならん
おれは　おまえたちの　大将でもないし　敵でもないが
おれは　おまえたちを　けちらかしたり　ころしたりする
おれは　こまった
おれは　くわをたてて考える
だが虫けらよ
やっぱりおれは土をたがやさんばならんでや
おまえらを　けちらかしていかんばならんでや
なあ
虫けらや　虫けらや[4]

What is it that makes this poem so powerful? Perhaps in part, it is the poem's form: a yearning toward symmetry, in its listing of the discriminatory epithets assigned to its second person addressee, an act that, one by one, helps to acknowledge the violence of bigotry ingrained within each term. It is an open meditation through which Ōzeki questions, is troubled by, and regrets the forms of destruction, violence, and killing upon which his daily life crucially depends. He puts the critters of the earth in both an analogous and yet opposing position to himself: a young farmer, a human being. The poem is an unfolding expression of his recognition and inner conflict on the need to disrupt and in some cases kill in order to maintain his life. This young child who looked with such affection and connectedness toward the earth-bound life forms went on a few years later to serve in the Imperial navy and died under a barrage of bombs that targeted his ship in the South Pacific. He was 18 at the time.

So what does this poem add to the discussion of violence and children? The poem is an expression of becoming aware of how our lives

[4] Ōzeki Matsusaburō, "Mushikera," in *Yamaimo: Ōzeki Matsusaburō shishū: kaisetsu to shidō kiroku* (Tokyo: Yuri shuppan, 1951), 30–33.

are built on violence towards others, other species, other human beings, every day. Ōzeki was able to pay heed and see it, as he tilled and worked the earth. But now most of us are many times removed. Or, perhaps we look away out of fear of what we will find, or are too inured to take its full reality in. While the proletarian movement pointed to the ways that children are particularly vulnerable to the damage inflicted by violence, this poem offers a continual reminder to all of us, to our continual complicity in structures of violence.

It is a sobering reality that violence was a problem seen and experienced by proletarian children every day, so much so that they may have been sensitized to its innumerable forms more so than other children of privilege. This sensitivity made possible tender meditations on complicity, as in Ōzeki's poem, which observed how violence was reproduced and sustained, even by his own hand. In asking how we should engage with the violence present in our contemporary society, Ōzeki's honest, respectful plea may provide us with one possible place from which to begin.

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