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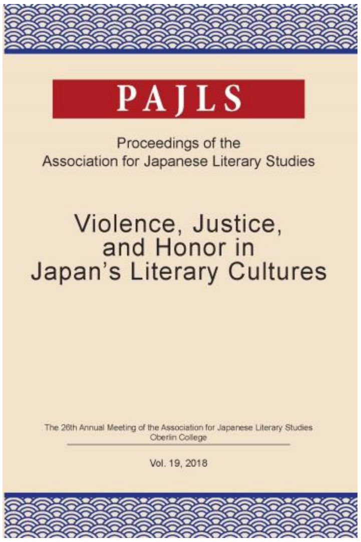

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ON PROLETARIAN LITERATURES, PAST AND FUTURE

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The prewar proletarian literary movement (*puroretaria bungaku*) is sometimes assayed as a kind of brief aberration in Japanese literary history, an alternately glorious or embarrassing red decade from the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s. But that short period is better understood as the apogee of a much longer trajectory that began decades before, and would continue to meaningfully influence literary and artistic movements through the postwar period. The flowering of radical literary culture in the 1920s and early 1930s was the product of a socialist movement in Japan that began in the late 19th century and grew in intellectual depth, organizational capacity, and popular support through the 1900s and 1910s, as the politics of class and labor found a place in mainstream mass media. Conversely, neither the intense persecution, censorship, arrests, and killing of authors and activists in the 1930s nor the complete suppression of the movement until the end of the war in 1945 meant that proletarian works and authors suddenly vanished. Works of proletarian literature and criticism produced in the 1920s and 1930s continued to inform fiction and discourse through the 1950s, 1960s, and beyond. For all those writers who never returned from the desert of apostasy (*tenkō*) and recantation, many figures remained politically active and committed. To give just a single example from among this cohort, Matsuda Tokiko (1905–2004), discussed in Norma Field's paper elsewhere in this volume, remained engaged in activist work through the occupation period, and then via struggles over nuclear power, and in the anti-war movement in the 21st century.

Another common criticism of prewar proletarian literature, both by unsympathetic readers at the time and later literary historians, is that it is slavishly ideological, politically simplistic, or lacking in artistic merit as aesthetics are subsumed by politics. Recent scholarship, including in English by Norma Field, Heather Bowen-Struyk, Mika Endo, and many others in the anthology volume *For Dignity, Justice, and Revolution*, as well as in Japan by scholars such as Kō Young-ran, has demonstrated that nothing could be further from the truth.[2] The best writers of prewar proletarian literature understood forms of art, writing, and expression as dynamic objects subject to changing modes of production and consumption and created by equally dynamic human subjects—they were, after all, historical materialists. Likewise, a careful consideration of the forms and styles (appropriately plural) of proletarian writing reveals a complexity that has been overlooked. Ninety years on, perhaps the best known work of proletarian criticism and theory remains Kurahara Korehito's (1902–1991) 1928 treatise "Puroretaria riarizumu e no michi" (The Road to Proletarian Realism), but even a cursory close reading of the essay shows that his understanding of realism is by no means a kind of crass "kitchen sink" realism; recall that Socialist Realism would not become Comintern doctrine until 1932.[3] Kurahara would go on to probe the complexities of the relations between aesthetic form and the revolutionary cause in later critical works such as *Puroretaria geijutsu to keishiki* (*Proletarian Art and Form*, 1930), as would other critics who wrote thoughtfully on these questions, including Hirabayashi Hatsunosuke (1892–1931) and Nii Itaru (1888–1951).[4]

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[2] Norma Field and Heather Bowen-Struyk, eds., *For Dignity, Justice, and Revolution: An Anthology of Japanese Proletarian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Kō Young-ran, *'Sengo' to iu Ideorogī Rekishi, Kioku,*

Likewise, the distance between proletarian literature and experimental modernist writing is not nearly as far as has been reified in a sharp binary between aesthetics and politics, both in the prewar moment itself and in later works of literary historiography. Writers typically described as anti-Marxist or opponents of the proletarian movement, such as Kawabata Yasunari (1899–1971) and Yokomitsu Riichi (1898–1947) were less at odds with the political content of that fiction as such than concerned that Marxist writing lived up to Marx's own dictates of remaining properly materialist in regards to formal structure. When proletarian texts did achieve such standards, critics were quick to praise them, as in Kawabata's high regard for Tokunaga Sunao's (1899–1958) *Taiyō no nai machi* (*Streets Without Sun*, 1929) as well as other works of proletarian fiction.[5] Another oft-forgotten fact about the literature, art, and associated texts of the prewar Japanese leftist movement is that they were—if not outrightly

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Bunka (Tokyo: Fujiwara Shoten, 2010).

[3] Kurahara Korehito, "Puroretaria riarizumu e no michi," in *Nihon Puroretaria Bungaku Hyōronshū 4 – Kurahara Korehito* (Tokyo: Shin-Nihon Shuppansha, 1990). See on this topic Mats Karlsson, "Kurahara Korehito's Road to Proletarian Realism," *Japan Review* 20 (2008): 231–273.

[4] On this subject, see Nathan Shockey, *The Typographic Imagination: Reading and Writing in Japan's Age of Modern Print Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020): 213–218.

[5] Heather Bowen-Struyk, "Rethinking Japanese Proletarian Literature," Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2001: 38.

popular—a major presence in the commercial publishing realm and sphere of popular discourse. Following the Russian Revolution, books and magazines on Lenin, labor struggles, socialist criticism, and other such topics proved to be major hits and bestsellers for mainstream mass-market publishing companies; red topics sold, and sold well. Kobayashi Takiji (1903–1933) was published in the general interest magazine *Chūō Kōron* (*The Central Review*). As discussed by Bowen-Struyk, stories by Chang Hyŏk-chu (1905–1998) and numerous other proletarian authors appeared in *Kaizō* (*Reconstruction*), as did many other works by proletarian writers. Debates between leftist literary factions regularly ran in the major newspaper *Asahi Shinbun*. *Das Kapital* was a block-busting bestseller appearing in multiple simultaneous translations. Thus, proletarian writers had to not only be on guard against censorship and state suppression, but also concerned with the commodification and reification in the mass media while they sought to popularize their cause.

All this is to say that political literature is, of course, by no means mutually exclusive with artistically accomplished work, nor is it mutually exclusive with popular literature and public attention. This is not a particularly controversial thesis, and yet it is often ignored when it comes to assaying the history of Japanese leftist writing. At the same time, Japanese proletarian literature does not only live in the annals of literary history; a decade ago, Kobayashi's *Kani kōsen* (*The Crab Cannery Ship*, 1929) again became an unlikely best seller, with new critical and popular editions published, multiple manga versions, film adaptations released to great fanfare, as contemporary readers found in these works a lens through which to understand the predicaments of the contingent existence of the modern precariat. The question as I see it is: given a historical understanding of literary and artistic form as a dynamic quantity, as the best prewar authors and critics did, what might "proletarian literature" look like or be called in today's world? How should we consider the politics of writing when "proletarian" subjects are formed vis-a-vis a new phase of post-industrial, neoliberal finance capitalism, precarious labor, temp work, and the online gig economy? As Heather Bowen-Struyk, Mika Endo, and others have asked elsewhere in this volume, what can literature do to reveal the how and why of the forces, visible and invisible, that keep people in states of destitution and poverty? In the prewar period, special police interrogators were careful to torture their victims in ways that would not leave marks; later, forms of violence would later become more subtle and invisible, occluded in structures of media and law. But today, the capability of the state for overt and systemic violence has again been unmasked.

It is crucial to understand how art can reveal the specific mechanisms of oppressive social structures that produce these forms of class-based, economic, racial, and sexual violence. To simply ascribe the cause to "capitalism" in broad strokes without detailing the particular interlocking layers and causes is not enough. We are behooved to find the ways in which the voices of those who face violence can be heard, and how they inform the art that they create, as well as the art created for them and in their names. Further, it is important to acknowledge the power of silence without rushing to simplistically equate voice with resistance and silence with complicity. Matsuda Tokiko took care to talk at length with rubber plant workers so she could accurately depict the distinct differences between their world and the nature of labor in mines with which she was already familiar; teachers in the *tsuzurikata undō* (life-writing movement) carefully induced children to describe their own lives in their own words. There is also the painful reality that those who resist forms of state violence can and do commit acts of violence themselves. We thus should see "heroes" as well as "villains" in their full complexity and context. Prewar works can help contemporary readers, thinkers, and activists guide the way. Today, to many of those living and working in the United States, Japan, or other post-industrial nations, the harsh realities of raw, brutal exploitation and death in mining towns are difficult to fully comprehend. But like literary expression, the forms of class violence are likewise historical and continue to transform. There are many places in the world in which life resembles Matsuda Tokiko's hometown in Akita, but there are also invisible forms of violence, surveillance, and social control that are carved into the mind and the soul as well as exerted upon the body. Matsuda sold her own breast milk to survive, while today people of all classes are entreated to sell our attention and personal information and encouraged to constantly perform and transform our own subjectivities to survive and succeed in social reproduction. Ultimately, the proletarian literature to come will not necessarily look like the proletarian literature that came before, and we must think hard and look hard to find it. But as we work to that end, we should look again to these works from almost one-hundred years ago, as well as their afterlives, for insight as to what a new movement might look like that shares their quality of expression, popular support and social commitment.

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