“Dead Man Walking: Yū Miri’s *JR Ueno eki kōenguchi*”

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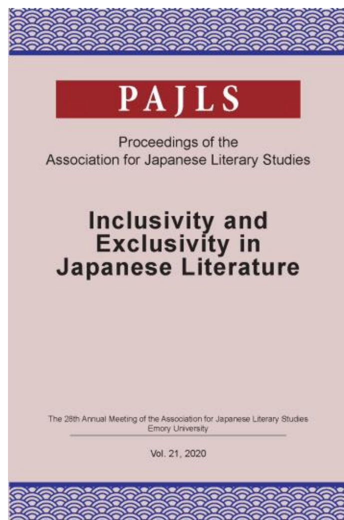

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DEAD MAN WALKING: YŪ MIRI'S *JR UENO EKI KŌENGUCHI*

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Although memories of the tragedies seem to have faded in immediacy, the 2011 triple disasters remain one of the most traumatic events of contemporary Japan. It is among the watershed moments that punctuates recent history. For many, the radiation following the meltdowns resonated with atomic bombs and the evacuations to schools and shelters during wartime. My interest here is in this congeries of disaster as narrated, or dreamt perhaps, by a homeless day laborer whom we also find, at novel's end, is not even alive. He narrates a life that began, impoverished, in Tohoku; that continued, in poverty, through the war years; and that ended, homeless in Ueno Park, with the Tohoku disasters. This is the trajectory of Yū Miri's *JR Ueno eki kōenguchi*.[2]

I have recently been considering the animals that figure in post-disaster fiction. These animals are companions, in Donna Haraway's sense, or that can be trans-corporeal, in Stacy Alaimo's, that is, animals as sentient beings that can share and communicate with us human animals. Much post-disaster fiction is "peopled" by such animals.

Another strong tendency in post-disaster fiction is narrators and characters who are dead. Many are "peopled" by those no longer alive. Itō Seikō's DJ Ark, in *Sōzō rajio* (Tokyo: Kawade shobō shinsha, 2013), being a very prominent example; cats in Kobayashi Erika's *Madamu Kyurī to chōshoku o* (Tokyo: Shūeisha, 2014) are sometimes "alive" in the present but also haunting from the past. Kimura Saeko has written of this: "One of the noteworthy characteristics of literature written after the 2011 Great Eastern Japan Earthquake Disasters is the appearance of characters, and even those who appear as narrators, who are dead."[3]

Kimura also points us to the work of Sekiguchi Ryōko who, in her "The Voice Appears" (Koe wa arawareru), wants to preserve in present memory the voice of someone now dead. Sekiguchi wants to ensure, that is, that we do not consign to the past the death of someone important in one's life. Sekiguchi considers how the voices of the dead that appear

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[2] Yū Miri, *JR Ueno eki kōenguchi* (Tokyo: Kawade shobō shinsha, 2014). Translated by Morgan Giles as *Tokyo Ueno station* (New York: Riverside Books, 2020).

[3] Kimura Saeko, *Sonogo no shinsai go bungakuron* (Tokyo: Seidosha, 2018), 165.

suddenly, today, in the life of a person always appear in the present tense. Even should the loved one whose vocal cords vibrated to make sound no longer exist in this world, the voice of the dead and what they have to say remains in the present. Conversation with them is not recreated in the past for one feels they are calling out to you in the present. Sekiguchi examples this by the jarring, but now common, experience of encountering in an old voice mail, say, or some other recorded means, the voice of someone who has died. Also, Sekiguchi, who lives in Paris and writes in French, had the *Charlie Hebdo* incident in mind when she wrote this.[4] Voices can resonate even in the absence of a physical body, or, rather, the voice calls into being the body within which it resides. In that sense they speak like ghosts (*bōrei*, in Japanese; *fantômes*, in Sekiguchi's French): "The ghosts travel back and forth. They move through two temporal states, but whether that is in the present or in the past they themselves do not know." In this way the ghosts "stir up the tenses." Sekiguchi's "The Voice Appears" closes with these lines, which Kimura analyzes as follows:

> The voice continues, always, in the present. The voice knows not death.
> As long as it exists, that is.
> Still, this person no longer here, appears, mercilessly, but incompletely.
> Even now, after they are gone, the air continues to vibrate [with their voice]
>
> The voice appearing this way, in the present, makes it that much more difficult to conduct a proper mourning, and it summons a "hauntological melancholy." In other words, the voice exists in the present as a ghost. It is exactly when thinking about one who cannot be totally consigned to oblivion, someone who is a living dead, that there is space for these ghosts to appear.[5]

Yū Miri's *JR Ueno eki kōenguchi* is a story that also features the "living dead," in the way to which Sekiguchi alludes, for, as we find in the final pages, the narrator is no longer alive.

This a subtle and compelling novel. One of the technical feats that keeps my attention is that the novel essentially begins and ends with the same scene, although the reader would not know this without having

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[4] Kimura Saeko, private conversation, July 5, 2018.
[5] Kimura, *Sonogo*, 171–172.

completed the reading. So, the scene with which it opens is one of a narrator overwhelmed and inundated with what I took to be a howling wind. Reading the opening pages, and knowing it was a novel touching on the disasters, I was not surprised by the narration of an assault on the senses, the overwhelmingness of waves of water and sound that characterizes many portrayals of disaster experience, of being washed over and away by the tsunami, of being shaken to the core and off one's feet by the earthquake. The opening lines are consistent with this literature in capturing what it feels to be in the midst of a maelstrom. I would add that this sense of being washed away, this description of an assault on the senses and reason, resonates loudly with the unbearable, inhumane experience one often encounters in soldiers' tales, of Japanese soldiers in the Asia-Pacific war in particular, but of war tales in general, as well.

The novel opens like this (in my translation):

> There's that sound, I hear it again
> God, that sound ——
> I hear it, it goes on and on
> Yet, I wonder: am I feeling it? am I thinking it? I can't tell
> Is it internal, in my head? Is it external, out there somewhere?
> Can't tell that either
> When, and what time, and who, and who was it? Can't tell.
> Is it something important?
> Was it important once?
> Or someone?
> I can't tell.[6]

The narrator wrestles with his own life and his past; he is trying to come to grips with "existence." The first pages consist of these poetic lines, narrative in the form of poetry perhaps, lines that lead us to question, as does he, what is known and what is knowable, what is experienced and what is delusion. The boundaries are unclear. Reality is under question. This maps exactly, of course, with the experience of those who lived through the disasters; these are the confusions one expects after the overwhelmingness of the disaster experience.

Mori Kazuo, the narrator of this novel, narrates his past and his present; we are pretty sure he is a dead man, dreaming, but not until the last lines do we get any clarity on even that. The sounds and vague sensations, maybe memories, that oppress him in the first lines are echoed

[6] 7–8.

near the end of the novel. They may be the same set of sensory material. But we are not sure. He is standing on the platform of Ueno Station. He goes elsewhere in his mind—"Am I feeling it? Am I thinking it"—of the first lines, he is not sure if the "sound like a jumbo jet taking off rumbled, and a moment later the earth shook" which leads him to "see" his granddaughter being swallowed by the tsunami, suggesting that this sound and rumble arose from, and with, the disasters. But there is also a train, a literal train—the Yamanote sen—bearing down on him. We are with him in this moment that he steps in front of that green train. Now, Mori Kazuo was never a soldier, but this experience reads like the PTSD of earlier trauma, transported away by sounds nearby that remind him of something else, sound that he himself cannot identify.

In these post-disaster tales we get animals, we get dead people, we also get a renewed sense and attention to postwar history. Takahashi Tetsuya's "system of sacrifice" that Davinder Bhowmik alludes to in her paper became much more visible.[7] The disasters made it harder to ignore the societal inequalities and stress points within Japanese society, in ways parallel to what we in the US learned about our society in the wake of Katrina. I want to think next about this fact, the overlap of Japanese history and personal history in these post-disaster tales. The disasters in Tohoku brought to the fore the history of relations between center and periphery, here marked as Tohoku/Fukushima and Tokyo, the sacrificial system that comes into sharp relief for many writing of the disaster experience. This obsession with history is something we see in other post-disaster works, like those of Furukawa Hideo, who is also especially, and angrily, invested in retelling the history of his region.[8]

Yū Miri herself famously moved to Minami Sōma some years ago and set up a bookstore and theater space. The name of this lovely space, "Full House," is also the title of one of her recent novels. Full House is a bookstore that also serves as a sort of community center. High school students come to relax and to do homework. It is also a theater space where

[7] Davinder Bhowmik, "The Emperor and his People in Post-3/11 and Post-Reversion Okinawan Fiction," Association for Japanese Literary Studies annual meeting, Emory University, January 24, 2020. I reference here, as does Davinder in her paper, Takahashi Tetsuya, *Gisei no shisutemu: Fukushima, Okinawa* (Tokyo: Shūeisha, 2012). See also Bhowmik's "Unruly Subjects in Shun Medoruma's 'Walking a Street Named Peace' and Miri Yū's *Tokyo Ueno Station*," *Wasafiri* 35:2 (2020): 60–66.

[8] I have in mind here Furukawa Hideo, *Umatachi yo, sore demo hikari wa muku de* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 2011); translated by Doug Slaymaker with Akiko Fukushima, *Horses, Horses, in the End the Light Remains Pure: A Tale That Begins with Fukushima* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

older members of the community, mostly women, frequently stop by and participate in the plays. This seems to give some credibility to Yū writing about Fukushima even though this is not her home nor was she present during the disasters.

For Mori Kazuo, the narrator of *JR Ueno eki kōenguchi*, the historical overlaps to the experience of Tohoku are the Olympics (both 1964 and the projected 2020 games) and the life of the emperor. Mori first arrived in Tokyo on a train from Fukushima and alighting at Ueno, in 1963, where he began working as a day laborer to construct Olympic facilities. I will say only a few words here about the Olympics, which structures this novel and, I think it is safe to say, the past 100 years of Japanese history and individual experience. In short, Mori Kazuo's life is structured by the 1964 Olympics when he leaves Fukushima to work on their construction. The Games structured the landscape, society, the entire geography. With these recollections come as well highways, after which the shopping malls, in the wake of Olympic development. He remembers how, at the same time, the Tohoku he knew disappeared. He goes to Tokyo, of course, to support his family. But, his going means, in a surprise to no one, that his absence during the subsequent years means that he has lost his family. The development that changes Tokyo is the same development that leads to the disappearance of Tohoku; his active construction is essentially the demise of these other places. Families and social structures too: his family does not know him. This is why it makes sense for a sixty-year-old man with a somewhat conventional family to go and camp out, as if he were homeless, in Ueno Park. That is, while Mori begins by narrating his experience of the 1964 Olympics, as readers of this novel we are inclined to think first about the 2020 Olympics. I think it safe to assume that Mori Kazuo would share the cynicism of many of us who see, yet again, the denial of the experience of those in Tohoku, in a system that not only requests, but demands, that the residents of Mori's part of the country sacrifice, in Takahashi's "system of sacrifice," for the greater good of the country. It's "under control" said Prime Minister Abe in a transparent lie in the Olympic bid. The construction resources needed in Tohoku following the disasters is now diverted to Tokyo.[9]

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[9] Kristina Iwata-Weickgenannt draws our attention to the Olympics that Mori does not mention: the 1940s Olympics scheduled for Japan that didn't happen because of the outbreak of WW2. These are the "missing games," the haunting games; see "The roads to disaster, or rewriting history from the margins—Yū Miri's *JR Ueno Station Park Exit*," *Contemporary Japan* 31:2 (2019), 185. DOI: 10.1080/18692729.2019.1578848

Mori's life tracks the history of economic growth and degradation, it also tracks the life and history of the emperor. Mori was born in 1933 as was Akihito, the Heisei Emperor. But further, the Heisei emperor's son and Mori's son were both born on the same day. Mori finds these overlaps auspicious and names his son Kōichi, borrowing the first Chinese character of the prince's son for his own. Mori also remembers the Emperor's visit to Haramachi, in Fukushima prefecture, in 1947. That moment was of huge crowds waiting for the emperor to alight. Mori is in that crowd, separated from the emperor by nothing more than a thin tape boundary. "Banzai" in Haramachi, cries of "Banzai" again in 1960 on the day when the Heisei emperor's son, and also Mori's, were born. And then, near the end, the imperial family are driving through Ueno Park and Mori, seeing the emperor with whom he feels so much in common, is separated from him again. Not by the yellow tape this time, but by a pane of glass, the thin windowpane of the imperial car. I could just leap on the car, thinks Mori.[10] This should remind us of the final scenes of the Medoruma Shun novel that Davinder Bhowmik told us about. Because that is the case, and because it is really Davinder's idea, in lieu of a conclusion, I direct the reader to Davinder Bhowmik's final paragraphs, which I read at the time of this presentation.

[10] One more important note, this too borrowed from Kristina Iwata-Weickgenannt, is that the sort of overlaps of life—birthdays and sons—that Mori is so proud of, suggesting that a day laborer and the emperor share so much in common, would very likely have been actionable as *lèse-majesté* in an earlier time of Mori's life.